Christmas trees – past to present

The Christmas tree is one of our most popular and enduring symbols of the Christmas Season. Its roots can be traced back to antiquity. The story of the Christmas tree is an interesting account of historical continuity linking the past with the present.

Much of the following information comes from Dr. Bob Black, retired UF/IFAS Extension Horticulturist, the National Christmas Tree Association and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

The Christmas tree gets its name from the Christian celebration but trees and boughs were widely used for religious ceremonies before the emergence of Christianity. In ancient Egypt, people celebrated the beginning of the winter season by bringing green date palms into their homes. The plants symbolized “life triumph over death,” a theme that carries over into our present custom. Romans used evergreen boughs to celebrate their Feast of Saturn, which also occurred at the winter solstice, to mark the return of the sun. This feast was marked by eating, drinking merrymaking, exchanging of gifts and decorating houses with candles and greenery.

After Christianity was accepted, Roman church leaders replaced the Feast of Saturn with Christmas. They marked December 25 as the day the birth of Christ would be celebrated. Many of the Feast of Saturn traditions carried over into the celebration of Christmas.

The custom of decorating evergreen trees possibly began with the very early forest dwellers. They often hung gifts of food on tree branches as offerings or sacrifices. The oldest reference to a decorated tree inside the home dates back to 1605 Germany. Decorations included fruit, ribbons, nuts, strings and colored paper. The early Christmas trees were small tabletop trees. It is thought that the large floor-to-ceiling Christmas tree began in the United States. Candles of the early years gave way to electric lights beginning in the late 1800’s. By the early 1930’s most American homes were brightened by Christmas trees during the Christmas Season.

The commercial Christmas tree business began with two ox-sled loads of firs sold in New York City in the 1850’s. Nationally, today about thirty million real Christmas trees are used for Christmas annually. They are grown on farms in every state, including Florida and in Canada.

Some people worry about all those trees that are cut each year but according to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), “Christmas tree harvesting does not upset the ecology.” More than eighty-five million trees were planted this spring by Christmas tree growers to replace the thirty million trees that will be harvested this year. The rule of thumb is to plant two to three trees for every tree cut.
FDACS also points out that purchasing a Florida grown tree requires less fuel for transportation, supports the farmers of the state and boosts Florida’s economy.

An acre of Christmas trees produces enough oxygen to meet the daily oxygen requirements of eighteen people. There are approximately 500,000 acres of Christmas trees grown nationally. Eighty percent of artificial trees are manufactured in China. It is estimated that three times as many real Christmas trees will be purchased in 2005 as compared to fake or artificial trees.

A couple of Christmas tree farms in our area are Bouvier Farms in Baker (850-537-6362) and Strickland Christmas Tree Farm in DeFuniak Springs (850-951-1005).

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