

Christmas trees



There are so many traditions that come with the holidays, and the season would be far less enjoyable without them. Plants, meals and presents are all indispensable. Traditional foods and gifts vary widely among different individuals and their cultures, but we have a few essential plants.

The Christmas tree is possibly the most obvious example. Would it really be a holiday if there were no Christmas trees? When December rolls around, homes around the country must often be reorganized in order to accommodate a tree, whether

it is to be fir or spruce, fresh cut, potted, or even artificial. Now most of the US and Europe follow the custom, although there are many explanations as to how it became so important.

Ancient peoples, from Egyptians to the Chinese, used garlands and wreaths to symbolize eternal life. Tree worship was common among pagans of Northern Europe, and it could be that the tree is simply an evolution of that belief from paganism to Christianity. A number of pre-Christian rites included bringing the branches of some kind of conifer indoors during the winter. This was likely a way to celebrate continuing life and the hope of new light during a time of cold and dark.

Martin Luther in Renaissance Germany was probably the first person to begin adding candles to an evergreen tree within a Christian context, but this was not brought indoors. At first, these trees were decorated in places like town squares, not in churches or homes. Not until the late 1600's did the tree become an interior decoration. Even then, for many years the Christmas tree was limited to the homes of upper class Protestants in Germany, but the rest of European aristocracy began bringing Christmas trees into their homes by the end of the 18th century.



In the United States, the custom might have been first introduced during the Revolution in Connecticut, by a Hessian soldier who was a prisoner there. A town in Pennsylvania claims to having had the first American Christmas tree, but that tree was considerably later, not erected until 1816.

Ornaments have evolved along with the tree. Candles were among the earliest decorations, but those have been replaced by strings of lights – far less of a fire hazard! Fruits, particularly apples, were added, possibly as a reminder of the Adam and Eve story. Our round glass balls

probably developed from that custom. Candy canes became popular in the middle of the 19th century, around the same time as placing a star on the treetop.

Lighting the White House Christmas tree is a national event, and many visitors to New York City enjoy the beautiful enormous tree in the middle of Rockefeller Center. These are erected and decorated relatively early, as many people put up their trees in the beginning of December and take them down around December 26 or so. Other people leave them up until early in January, the feast of the Magi.

Whatever their origins, these trees are central to our holiday. May we all have a safe and happy holiday!

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