

Living Christmas Tree

In this season, many people bring an evergreen tree in and make it the center of attention for weeks. With lights, glass ornaments, icicles and popcorn strings, the tree becomes a glorious treat for the eyes.

Why not a tree that lives beyond the holidays?

Living Christmas trees can provide the best of both worlds. Cutting down a tree, keeping it for a short time, then throwing it in the trash, feels like a waste. Once, I would decorate my *Ficus benjamina* (weeping fig) for December, and have a big houseplant the rest of the year. But now I am a traditionalist; it must be an evergreen for the holidays, and I prefer keeping a tree alive. Like every other living thing, however, a living Christmas tree requires care.

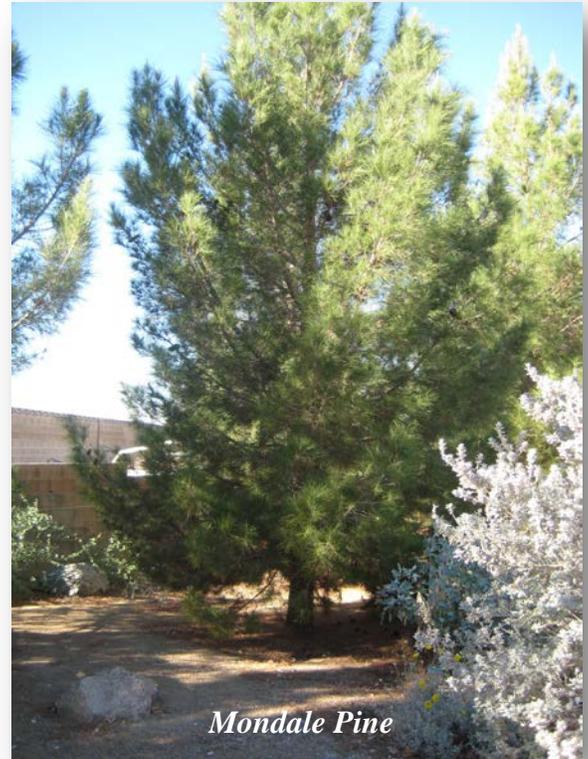
What kind of tree? It must survive southern Nevada's challenging climate. Several well-adapted trees naturally have the customary pyramid shape: Mondale and Aleppo pines, incense cedar, and western juniper all do well here, even growing over 40 feet. Of the firs, only Spanish fir, *Abies pinsapo*, seems to survive here. Southern Nevada is too dry and hot for hemlocks.

As with any other plant, **make sure the tree is healthy** before buying. Are needles green and well attached? You should not shake a limb and get a shower of dead foliage. There should not be holes in limbs or trunk, which could indicate borer damage. You should not see signs of insects under the needles.

Second, **do not get too large a tree**. A six-foot tree with soil and root ball weighs more than 100 pounds. Anything over six feet tall is susceptible to transplant shock.

Keep it indoors ten days or less. In autumn, many plants, including evergreens, go dormant. You do not want to wake up the tree until after it has been planted outside. Otherwise it behaves as if it were spring. Indoors, it is warm and lights are on for fifteen or sixteen hours daily. The tree tries to produce new leaves without having the necessary resources; one reason that living Christmas trees sometimes do not make it. Another reason is - the root ball dries out. Definitely keep it watered. Use smaller lights that produce less heat. Place it away from radiators, vents and fireplaces.

After the holidays, before transplanting, re-acclimate the tree. Put it in a garage or cool sheltered spot for a few days before bringing it outside.



Planting your living Christmas tree is much the same as any tree. Find a place where it will look good when fully grown. Dig a hole as deep as the root ball but at least three times as wide. Before planting, fill the hole with water. The water should drain completely overnight. If not, find another spot. If the root ball is wrapped in plastic or treated burlap, remove the wrapper. Loosen roots and stand the tree up in the hole. Back fill with the soil (slightly amended), tamping it down to remove air pockets. Water thoroughly and watch it slowly grow.

Happy Holidays!

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