

## CHRISTMAS TREES

A Christmas tree is probably the most commonly recognized symbol of Christmas. Until fairly recently, all Christmas trees came from natural forests in the United States. Today, however, many Christmas trees are planted and grown as a crop on over a million acres of private lands by over 15,000 tree growers. Trees are grown for Christmas in all 50 states. Foresters play a prominent role in managing lands, both public and private, for Christmas trees. It takes 6 to 15 years to grow a tree to a point where it is ready for Christmas. During that time it must be protected from insects, diseases, and fire. It may require shearing to attain a desirable shape and some trees need irrigation or fertilization. All during this time, trees are producing oxygen; an acre of trees may provide the daily oxygen requirement for 18 people. Real trees are renewable and recyclable, used after Christmas in wildlife habitat and fish habitat projects, erosion control projects and even serving as landscape mulch to conserve water. On the other hand, artificial trees produced in China (80%), Taiwan and Korea have about a 6 year life before being sent to the landfill.

In the United States, the states of Oregon, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Washington, and Wisconsin are the top real Christmas tree producers. Canada is also a large producer. The top selling trees are balsam fir, Douglas-fir, Fraser fir, noble fir, Scotch pine, Virginia pine, and white pine.

Christmas trees are not mentioned in the Bible, so where did this tradition originate? A very interesting book, which I highly recommend to you, details information on the Christmas tree tradition. It is "Stories behind the Great Traditions of Christmas" by Ace Collins and published by Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan. I will just paraphrase a few brief excerpts from the book here.

"In the brutal winters of Scandinavia, Vikings found hope and strength in the evergreen tree, because it not only survived the harsh winter, it actually seemed to thrive. To bring some of this into their daily lives, they would cut a tree and bring it into their home. In the seventh century, St. Boniface, in England referred to the evergreen tree as the tree of life. It was the tree that even winter could not kill. He noted its triangular shape and said it represented the three parts of the Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This spread to France and Germany, where each winter a tree was hung upside down from the ceiling of the home as a symbol of Christianity. We do not know exactly why the tree was upside down, but probably it was simpler to do it that way. Probably the first topside up decorated tree that was called a Christmas tree appeared in Riga, Latvia in 1510. The first printed reference about a Christmas tree appeared in 1531 in Germany. Royalty spread the idea of having a Christmas tree throughout Europe. Martin Luther noted starlight coming through the branches of trees in the forest and decided to try putting candles on his Christmas tree to represent the light Christ brought to the world. His idea spread and the lighted tree became a symbol of Christmas and the Christian faith. Germans in Pennsylvania are credited with the introduction of the Christmas tree to America in the 1820's."

In 1851, the first Christmas tree retail lot was started in New York. In 1856, President Pierce placed the first Christmas tree in the White House. In 1900 large stores

started displaying lighted Christmas trees. In 1923, President Coolidge started the first Christmas tree lighting ceremony on the White House lawn. Thus, the idea of having a tree for Christmas gradually became an enduring tradition throughout the nation.

I personally have seen “Christmas trees” made from all sorts of materials other than evergreen trees including tumbleweeds, bare deciduous shrubs, palm trees, cactus and, of course, plastic. However, the evergreen tree remains steadfastly the most popular. The National Christmas Tree Association estimates that 30 to 35 million real Christmas trees are displayed in U.S. homes each year. Our estimate for Colorado based on our work in estimating wood use in the state was 526,000 trees in 1999 and I would further estimate that has risen to 635, 500 trees in 2010.

As Christians and Foresters, these trees have special meaning to us. Not only do we understand what is required in planting and growing trees for Christmas, we also understand the many benefits these trees provide in erosion control, cooling and cleaning the air, removing carbon dioxide and pollutants, and providing esthetic beauty to landscapes. Also when Christmas trees are removed in thinning, this makes way for remaining trees to grow into larger sizes for use in other wood products.

However, the real meaning of the tree is the way it points us to the gospel. It was by a tree that man first sinned; it was by a tree that the Lord Jesus Christ made a perfect sacrifice to save us from our sins, and it will be by the Tree of Life that we are finally gathered together in heaven with Him. Praise God for this wonderful testimony of God’s grace and mercy provided by the Christmas tree!

Denny Lynch

#### References:

- National Christmas Tree Association, St. Louis, MO.
- University of Illinois Extension. 2010 Christmas Trees and More Website
- “Stories behind the Great Traditions of Christmas” Ace Collins, Zondervan Publishing
- “Wood Use in Colorado at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century” Dennis Lynch and Kurt Mackes Research Paper RMRS-RP-32 Rocky Mountain Research Station US Forest Service Sept. 2001