Dual Purpose Holiday Trees

Distribute 11-26-2015

Depending on your landscape situation you may be able to get a double impact with your holiday tree this year. Consider a live Christmas tree that can be planted in the landscape after it completes its service as the decorated holiday tree.

The first thing to determine is if you need a new conifer in your landscape. There are large trees that work in the dual role and then some smaller plants. Sheared Aleppo pines and Italian stone pines are large trees that are available. Other large trees that often have have a natural Christmas tree shape are deodar cypress and Arizona cypress. Upright ornamental junipers and Leyland cypress are smaller trees (10-12 ft.) that also have an acceptable holiday tree shape.

Once it grows out of its holiday sheared shape, Aleppo pine has a classic pine growth pattern, narrow crown with a straight trunk. Examples of mature Aleppo pines are common on the old Kelly Air Force Base grounds (Joint Base San Antonio). They grow to about 40 feet tall.

An Italian stone pine will also grow to 40 ft. tall but it has a wide flat crown.

Arizona cypress and deodar cedar are not usually sheared but often have a natural conical shape that makes them a good choice for a live Christmas tree. The Arizona cypress grows to about 30 ft. tall with a very dense silver blue crown. The crown will grow to 20 ft. in diameter. Deodar cedar has an open crown with weeping branches and attractive bluish needles.

Rosemary is not a conifer but the sheared version makes a good small (3 ft.) holiday plant that can be decorated and then planted in a container or the garden.

For best success limit the live holiday tree to a 3 week stint indoors. Keep the container well watered. The water should emerge from the drip hole at every watering. A drip pan is needed to protect the floor. It is often easiest to place and decorate the tree on the patio or porch. If you do use it inside (where it will be in full shade) move it to a transition site outside where the tree will receive morning sun for 2 or 3 days before moving it to its permanent home in full sun.

Live trees can be heavy because they include a root ball and soil in the container. Have plenty of help lined up and a transportation plan organized to move the plant.

The plants described in this article are well adapted so they should prosper in our native soils. Do not add potting soil or soil amendments to the planting hole. Dig the hole to the same depth as the container and twice as wide if possible. Return the native soil to the planting hole and fill the hole to the brim with water. Cover the soil surface over the root area with 4 inches of mulch. Apply a generous soaking of water every time that the soil under the mulch becomes dry to the touch. That will usually be every 2-3 weeks through the first summer.