

HOME & GARDEN

Plan now for live Christmas tree memories

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A tree can be a living memorial, planted to honor an individual or mark an occasion. This is something we often think about in the spring at Arbor Day when many communities and families plant trees, but it is also time to think about it in the fall when we might consider using a live Christmas tree over the holidays and then planting it as a reminder of a happy time.

I have been particularly attracted to this idea ever since a summer a few years ago when my husband and I stopped to visit the Shaker Village in Canterbury, N.H.

The Shakers are a religious sect that reached its greatest strength in the middle of the last century and is well known today because of the quality and simple design of its furniture. However, there are very few Shakers left today, and it was with great surprise that we realized three-Shaker ladies still lived in Centerbury.

In fact, our tour guide that day was the son of the man who had helped the Shaker community a few years earlier, when they were having financial difficulties, by creating the Shaker museum. Consequently, our young guide had spent much of his childhood living with the Shakers.

He explained to us that since the Shakers required celibacy

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of all their members, they depended on converts to enlarge the community. They also took in children who had been abandoned or whose parents had to give them up either temporarily or permanently because they were unable to care for them. (The children did not become official members of the community until they came of age and could make the decision on their own to accept all the obligations of the faith.)

The tour began with a walk down an avenue of venerable trees, and our guide explained that in days past each child who came to live in the village was given a tree, and it was the child's responsibility to care for and water the young sapling until it was strong and fine, a symbol of the child's life in the community.

As we walked between the beautiful old trees, we came to one that belonged to another generation; the young man touched it and explained that this tree had been given to him to tend. It was obvious from his manner that the tree meant a great deal to him.

A live Christmas tree chosen this year can be a memento of a child's growth or just of a lovely holiday season. If you do decide to use a live tree for Christmas, follow these steps:

- Decide now where it will be planted. Will you start a "memory lane," use it along a boundary or plant it as a specimen in the lawn? Pick the spot that's best for you.

- Dig a generous hole, remembering that small trees will survive a transplanting most successfully, but that even they will come with an ample root ball.

- Take the soil from the hole and bag it, storing it where it will not freeze, perhaps in the cellar or garage.

- Fill the hole with bags of leaves to keep the soil from freezing. These leaves can later be used to mulch the tree after it is planted.

- When it's time to shop for your tree, look for one that is green and healthy. If you find a tree with yellowing or dropping needles, don't think that care will bring the tree back. It has already started to die, and you'll need a strong tree to celebrate the holidays and then survive the rigors of transplanting.

- Once you have your tree, keep the root ball moist and never set the tree near wood stoves or fireplaces. Set the tree up in a cool spot and don't leave it in the house for more than 10 days.

- When it is time to plant the tree outdoors, remove the bags of leaves from your hole and arrange the tree so that it will not be planted any deeper than it was originally. This may mean adding a little of your reserved soil to the hole

first.

- Untie and loosen the burlap wrapping around the root ball, but don't worry about removing it entirely. It will rot, and the roots will grow right through the burlap.

- Add half the soil to the hole and give the tree a good watering. When the water has soaked in, add the rest of the soil and water again, finishing off with a layer of leaf mulch to prevent the soil from drying out.

- If January is very dry, give the tree another watering because evergreens do continue to respire, to breathe moisture, even during the winter.

A live tree that will be used during the holidays and then planted in the yard can commemorate each special Christmas, or it can be "given" to one of the younger members of the family to water and prune — the tree's growth keeping pace with the child's.

All children love to hear stories about themselves and their family's history. "This tree was planted when you were three," the year you first went to nursery school," or "This was planted the year you broke your arm," or "This tree was planted the year you lost your first baby tooth."

The planting of the tree can mark the milestones of a child's life, and the stories can become a part of the family's history and mythology. It is not an opportunity to be lightly passed up.

When frost is