How to Keep Your Christmas Tree Fresh through the Holidays
Sources: Chal Langren (CL); Gary Chastagner (GC)

AURORA, Ore. – From vodka in the water to I.V. tubes in the trunk, there are lots of urban myths about how to take care of your cut Christmas tree. Chal Landgren, Oregon State University Extension Christmas tree specialist, busts those myths and answers some common questions.

Q. How do I know a tree is fresh when I purchase it?
C.L. Choose a tree that looks green and healthy with needles that snap like a fresh carrot. Shake it a few times to get rid of old needles.

Once home, place the tree in water if you do not plan to put it up immediately. Choose a large, water-filled stand to display the tree indoors. Check the water level daily; trees will be very thirsty the first few days inside a heated home.

Q. Do I need to recut the stem after I get my tree home?
C.L. Yes, if more than 24 hours has elapsed since the stem was last cut. The fresh cut helps water uptake and the sooner you can get the tree into water, the fresher it will be.

Q. Do I need to cut 2 inches off the tree base for it to take up water in the stand?
C.L. No, cutting a ¼-inch slice off the base is plenty for water uptake. However, clearing the ceiling is another question.

Q. Do I need to cut the base of the trees at an angle, drill holes in the base or install plastic tubes so the tree can get water?
C.L. No. Water is taken up the tree through microscopic tubes called "tracheids" in the wood just beneath the bark. The wood near the outer part of the stem is very efficient in conducting water and becomes less so towards the center. So, simply cut the stem perpendicular to the trunk to maximize the area exposed to the water. Complicated cuts, drill holes or I.V. tubes do not help.

Q. Do I need to add something to the water to help the tree stay fresher?
C.L. People have added all kinds of things to water, including vodka, 7-Up, bleach, aspirin, and sugar. However, clean cold water is all that is needed. Some additives actually can cause your the tree to shed needles or dry out more rapidly.

Q. Will any tree stand work, as long as it holds the tree up?
C.L. No. A stand should hold a quart of water for every inch of stem diameter. A tree with a six-inch stem diameter will need a stand that holds a gallon and a half of water. Very few stands have the capacity for today’s large trees. Consider purchasing a new stand, or a smaller tree, if the water capacity is not adequate.

Q. If my decorated tree runs out of water, do I need to take it down and recut the base?
C.L. No. If you refill the water stand within 24 hours of going dry, most trees (Douglas-fir, noble, Nordmann, Fraser) should rehydrate just fine. For grand fir, twelve hours may be the limit. Of course, it is best if the tree does not run out of water, so check it every day. Your tree may not be the only one drinking from the tree stand — your pets may be helping themselves to the water, too. So check the water level daily, especially in the first few days. If your tree becomes dry and brittle, it may be time to take it down.

Last word: enjoy your tree and enjoy the holidays.