

The Tradition of the Christmas Tree

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY **Barbara Hankins**

A Christmas tree is part of many people's holiday season. To many, the beginning of the holiday season is signaled by decorating the Christmas tree. The aroma, beauty, and special adventure of having a tree are sensed by all in the home.

Cool weather conditions and a Christmas tree in the home are part of many people's holiday season during this time of the year. However, weather forecasters are playing the role the Grinch Who Stole Christmas since temperatures will likely be unusually warm over the holiday season.

Either cutting your own Christmas tree or selecting

one at the local lot and then bringing it inside the home are all part of modern family traditions. To many, the beginning of the holiday season is decorating a tree. The aroma, beauty, and special adventure of having a tree are sensed by all in the home.

Of the many traditions involving plants associated with Christmas, the

Christmas tree is probably the most beloved. A wide-eyed child gazing at his or her first Christmas tree is far removed from ancient Romans shouting incantations to a decorated tree. Yet, it is from these cultures that the Christmas tree custom originated.

While most people probably believe the Christmas tree tradition has always



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been with us in the United States, a historical overview of how Christmas trees rose to such prominence is quite interesting and not always precise. The following provides a synopsis of some Christmas tree traditions throughout the centuries:

- The decorated Christmas tree can be traced back to the ancient Romans who during their winter festival decorated trees with small pieces of metal.
- An evergreen, known as the Paradise tree, was decorated with apples as a symbol of the feast of Adam and Eve held on December 24 during the middle ages.
- Sixteenth century folklore credited Martin Luther as being the first to decorate an indoor tree. After a walk through a forest of evergreens with shining stars overhead, Luther tried to describe the experience to his family and showed them by bringing a tree into their home and decorating it with candles. Some historians state that the first evidence of a lighted tree appeared more than a century after Martin Luther's death in 1546.
- The oldest record of a decorated Christmas tree came from a 1605 diary found in Strasburg, France. The tree was decorated with paper roses, apples, and candies.
- In Austria and Germany during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the tops of evergreens were cut and hung upside down in a living room corner. They were decorated with apples, nuts, and strips of red paper.
- The first record of Christmas

- trees in America was for children in the German Moravian Church's settlement in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, during Christmas in 1747. Actual trees were not decorated, but wooden pyramids covered with evergreen branches were decorated with candles.
- The custom of the Christmas tree was introduced in the United States by Hessian troops during the War of Independence. An early account tells of a Christmas tree set up by American soldiers at Fort Dearborn, Illinois, the site of Chicago, in 1804. Most other early accounts in the United States were among the German settlers in eastern Pennsylvania.
- Charles Minnegrode introduced the custom of decorating trees in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1842.
- By 1850, the Christmas tree had become fashionable in the eastern states. Until this time, it had been considered a quaint foreign custom.
- The Christmas tree market was born in 1851 when Catskill farmer Mark Carr hauled two ox sleds of evergreens into New York City and sold them all. By 1900, one in five American families had a Christmas tree, and 20 years later, the custom was nearly universal. Christmas tree farms sprang up during the depression. Nurserymen couldn't sell their evergreens for landscaping, so they cut them for Christmas trees. Cultivated trees were preferred because they have a more symmetrical shape than wild ones.
- Franklin Pierce was the first president to introduce the Christ-

mas tree to the White House in 1856 for a group of Washington Sunday school children. The first national Christmas tree was lighted in the year 1923 on the White House lawn by President Calvin Coolidge.

- The first Christmas tree in a church seems to have been in 1851 by Pastor Henry Schwan in Cleveland, Ohio. At first, his parishioners objected to this practice. Some members of the congregation even threatened him with harm. But the minister convinced his flock that Christmas trees were a Christian rite, and opposition soon stopped. New customs, even those as fine as the decorating of Christmas trees, often receive strong resistance when first introduced. The tradition of the Christmas tree is no exception—hot tempers cool, enthusiasm grows, and new practices become old traditions. Take a moment to truly look at your tree this year and see the history. For most people, holiday trees represent psychological comfort across time, generations, and a changing world. During holidays, trees play an important part in our social and family traditions.

