

Natural Christmas trees far safer than plastic

Natural Christmas trees are far safer than plastic ones in Canadian homes, the president of the Christmas Tree Growers' Association of Ontario says.

"We've put it to the test," says Harold Worley of Fournier, Ontario. "We put a match to a fresh natural tree and another match to a plastic tree."

"With the artificial tree, fireballs of melting plastic started dropping on the rug while

the natural tree was laden with moisture and refused to catch fire."

He disputed statements from the Ontario Fire Marshal's office that artificial trees were safer than natural ones.

"I'd like to see them perform the same test, then they'd know what they're talking about," says Worley. "It's about time this myth was laid to rest."

"When a natural tree is placed with the butt end in water, it has a 100

per cent moisture content. It's impossible to ignite."

The only time natural trees could be dangerous is if they're allowed to dry out over a considerable length of time, turning the moist needles into dry tinder. Pine and fir are better than spruce for retaining moisture.

"In most cases, even a tree which has been cut and stored for a considerable length of time can be regenerat-

ed. When set in water, it will recover and maintain a safe moisture content."

The secret is to saw an inch or so off the old base. When a natural tree dries out, a film forms over the old cut which prevents moisture from being drawn up the trunk into the branches. Of course, the tree needs a constant supply of water at its base as well.

The Christmas Tree Growers' Association of

Ontario represents 175 growers and tree farm operators across the Province.

Across Canada, some 40 per cent of Canadian families still prefer natural trees, Worley says. Trees are grown as a field crop with thousands of acres planted and thousands of full-time employees and summer students engaged in trimming and shaping the trees during their life span of five to 16 years.

"Each year, for every tree harvested, three new trees are planted, mostly Scotch pine, spruce and balsam fir," Worley says.

The wholesaler - or grower - averages \$10 to \$11 a tree while the same tree will retail for \$15 to \$20. Many families also travel to tree farms in the weeks before Christmas to select and cut their own

tree, carrying on an age-old tradition.

"It gives the whole family the Christmas spirit when they take part in an outing to a tree farm," says Worley.

Some people complain that once Christmas is over, the tree is wasted but Worley says there are many ways by which the tree's life can be extended. It can be used as a backyard bird feeder and as a shelter for birds in storms.

Since a Christmas tree is biodegradable, the branches can be removed and used as mulch in the garden while the trunk can be used as firewood.

Fir tree branches can be cut into small pieces and stuffed into pillows, adding the fresh aroma of a tree to cushions for chesterfields or bedrooms.

Live potted trees are

also available. Standing from two to four feet tall (including the pot), these trees can be brought indoors for the Christmas season then set outside in the garden for the remainder of the year. They are mostly spruce and fir.

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