

# Real or artificial tree -- it's your ecological choice

It begins every year around this time. My ecological self starts arguing with the part of me that can't bear to think of Christmas without a real tree.

Well, I've done the math, and studied the impacts, and although I must admit that I did have a vested interest in the outcome, when it comes to selecting what kind of Christmas tree is the most environmentally responsible, the debate is



## Your Earth

Suzanne Elston

just about even. Whether you choose a real or artificial tree is really a matter of personal choice.

Artificial trees are largely made from plastic, an oil by-product, which is a non-renewable resource. On the plus side, the average life of an artificial tree is about 10 years.

This eliminates the need for the annual family trek to a tree farm or lot, which saves gas and oil.

The initial investment in a good artificial tree can be quite expensive.

Prices can range from around \$100 to \$250 for a

full-sized, life-like tree.

However, if you amortize this over a 10-year period, they are slightly less expensive than purchasing a real tree every year.

Since there are currently no systems in place to recycle artificial trees, they ultimately end up in the garbage dump.

On the other hand, most municipalities now have curbside mulching and composting programs for real trees.

Failing this, a discarded tree can be set up in the snow to

provide a shelter for birds, and then chopped for firewood once it has completely dried out.

If you decided to opt for a cut tree, always buy one that has been specifically grown as a crop. In most cases, tree farms are established on agricultural land that would be growing corn or other cash crops if they weren't growing trees. A reputable tree farmer will replant each year to replace fallen stock, thus replacing the oxygen producing qualities of the harvested trees.

Wild trees, whether on private land or part of a wildlife reserve, are part of the natural ecosystem, and should never be

cut solely for the purpose of providing a Christmas tree.

A third alternative is to purchase a live, potted tree.

This option takes some early planning, since your tree will have to be potted in the fall and a hole prepared for planting before the ground freezes.

There are a number of disadvantages to having a potted tree. You're limited to a tree about three feet in size because of the weight and size of the root ball. The tree can only be kept indoors for a few days, or it starts into a spring cycle. Once this occurs, the tree will likely shock and die when taken outside.

Once you've selected your tree, it's time to decorate. Stringing cranberries and popcorn can be a fun activity for the entire family that provides a naturally beautiful garland for your tree.

For best results, use day-old popcorn. The needle will slide through much easier, and the kernels will be less likely to crumble or break.

When Christmas is over, put your garlands outside for the birds to enjoy.

As for exterior lights, they can be a major energy consumer during the festive season.

But using a timer to turn your lights on and off has a number of benefits, aside from saving energy.

When you're not home, having lights come on automatically can act as a deterrent to would-be burglars.

A timer also eliminates the nightly chore of bundling up to turn the lights on and off.

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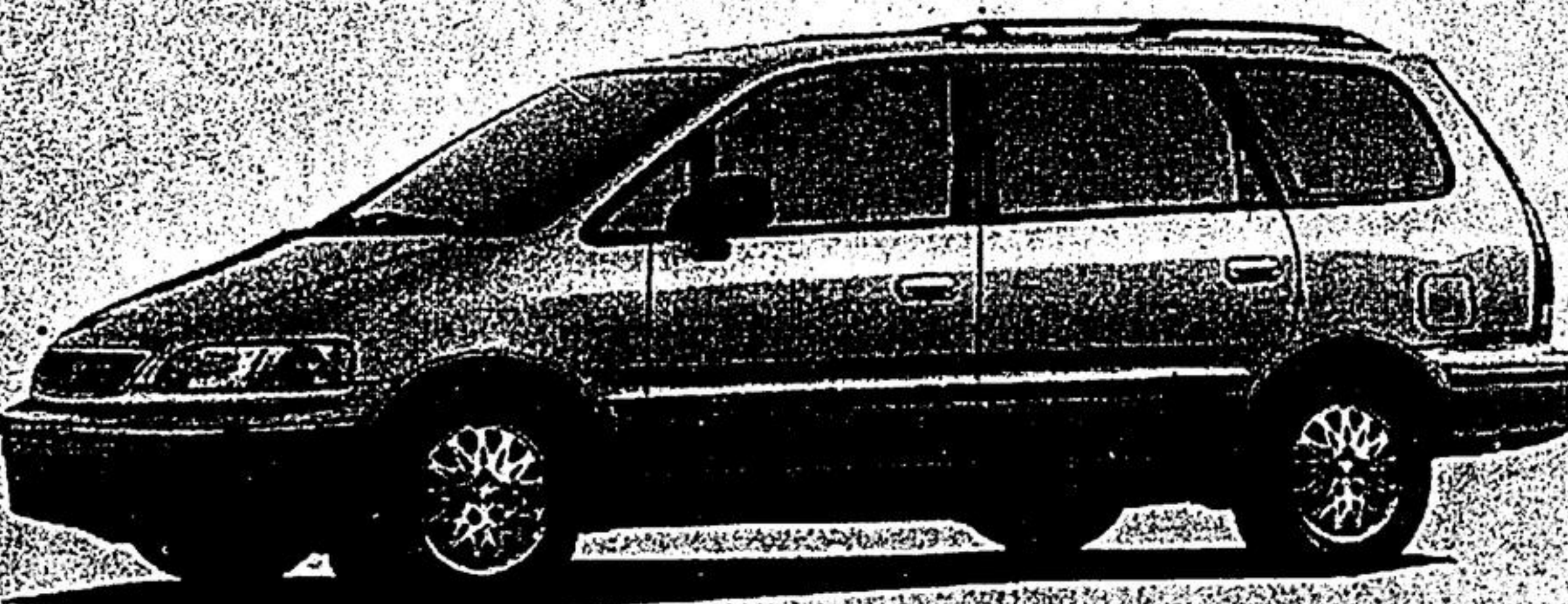
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