



Rockin' around the Christmas tree

Bombarded as we are in the preceding weeks, for many, it is the ritual choosing and dressing of the tree that marks the start of Christmas, says Jack Watkins

AS time renders childhood an increasingly distant speck on the horizon, memories grow fonder. Together with the Advent calendar, nothing evokes the feverish anticipation of December 25 more poignantly than the arrival of the Christmas tree. Specially selected from a nursery or, perhaps, a street trader in the village and brought into the garden—receiving, hopefully, an approving nod ('It's a nice shape')—there's then the ritual of shovelling soil into the tub and getting the tree standing straight ('Blasted thing's still crooked'). This trial overcome, the tree is brought inside for the big moment little hands have been waiting for, the enormous responsibility of decorating the branches with silver tinsel and glittering baubles. From the wonderful, fresh pine aroma to the hazard

of fallen needles spiking fingers and knees when playing with new toys beneath it, how on earth did bygone generations of children get through the festive season without a Christmas tree?

It may feel as if the family gathering around the tree is an annual re-enactment of an age-old ritual, but it is, in fact, of relatively recent origin in Britain. All the same, trees have long played a part in end-of-year celebrations. Inevitably, evergreens were the species of choice, their continuity of growth throughout the cold seasons, when most other vegetation had either died off or ceased to grow, seeming to symbolise endurance or eternity.

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At their pagan festival Saturnalia, held in honour of the god Saturnus, the Romans decorated their homes with wreaths of laurel and holly, as well as the evergreen or holm oak, a tree native to the Mediterranean, yet now familiar in our parks and gardens. In Britain, it was the holly that became the symbolic tree of Noël, its place as a symbol of everlasting life in winter-solstice folklore customs predating the arrival of the first Christian missionaries. The decking of churches and homes with its boughs has enjoyed a long tradition.

The instigator of what we'd now regard as the traditional, domestic, candlelit tree seems to have been the 16th-century German Bible scholar and reformer Martin Luther. Wandering through a Wittenberg pine ➤



Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (above), the German wife of George III, brought the idea of trees lit by candles (right) to Britain







have been selected months, if not years, before from the forests outside Oslo—is sent over by sea as a token of appreciation from the people of Norway, for the assistance given by Britain to their country in the Second World War. The traditional Norwegian-style, vertically strung lights are switched on at a special ceremony in early December.

Other species have also proved popular Christmas trees. The noble fir's blue-tinged foliage appeals to many and the sitka spruce has the same characteristic. Despite being a much-maligned evergreen, recalled for its monotonous blanket plantings across huge swathes of the countryside from the 1950s to the 1980s, the latter makes a tremendous impact in large public spaces, where its size enables it to stand out against surrounding buildings. Indeed, the tree selected for the illuminated spectacle in London's Covent Garden *piazza* each year has often been a sitka. However, the sitka and Norway spruces do have

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a tendency to drop needles, thus, when it comes to indoor trees, the Nordmann fir has come to be seen as the ideal choice. This tree is a native of the Black Sea region (it is also known as the Caucasian fir), where it can reach 240ft tall. It was introduced to this country in 1845 and has become highly marketable, thanks to its attractively dense foliage and non-spiky needles. These have the added recommendation of not dropping as the tree dries out in our centrally heated homes. The Fraser fir, with a blueish tint to the foliage and a slightly narrower shape, is recommended for interiors where space is at a premium. If you want something more exclusive, the harder-to-source lodgepole pine, which has soft, large needles, could be the one.

Slow as they may have been to adopt the Christmas tree in the 19th century, Britons today have taken to them to the extent that there are more than 300 registered growers in this country, selling some eight million trees each year. And, after this glummiest of years, it's a fair bet that it won't be only the children expressing delight at these glittering, twinkling spectacles. 🐾

Oh Christmas tree, oh Christmas tree

Buying your tree

- For a classically shaped and scented Christmas tree, the Norway spruce is a sound choice

- **If you have small children or pets, the Nordmann fir has better needle retention and softer foliage**

- Make sure you buy a British-grown tree. Grown in Britain runs a certification scheme ensuring trees are fresh and grown responsibly in the UK (www.growninbritain.org/christmas-tree-suppliers)

- **Look for real Christmas trees carrying the LEAF Marque certification, as these have been grown sustainably with due care and consideration for the surrounding environment (www.leafuk.org)**

Caring for your tree

- An evergreen's natural habitat at this time of year is outdoors in cool air, so don't place it too close to any radiators

- **Make sure your tree stand has watering facilities and don't let the tree dry out. It will need one to two litres of water a day**

- At the end of the festive period, consider recycling your tree, which can be chipped. Local authorities often provide special collections or have drop-off points (www.recyclenow.com/what-to-do-with/christmas-trees-1)

