



Out with the old, in with the new: Christmas tree disposal after the holidays

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Photo by H. Zidack

As the holiday season winds down and the chill of winter sets in, it's time for Connecticut residents to pack up the decorations and settle into 2025. Some of us resolve to save more money, while others might be committing to a new workout routine. However, to finish out 2024, we need to do one last thing: Dispose of the Christmas tree.

The Christmas trees we bring into our homes are typically evergreen conifers such as spruce, pine, and fir. While in the wild, some evergreen conifers can live over 1,000 years, trees grown on farms are usually cut when they are 5-10 years old. Once cut, the trees usually last about 4-6 weeks with regular watering. Evergreens have been a symbol of winter throughout human civilization. Ancient Celts, Egyptians, and Romans each had cultural celebrations falling on or near the winter solstice, and evergreens were often used to decorate homes and places of worship to remind people of the promise of new life and growth in spring. The familiar Christian tradition of today is traced back to the 16th century in Germany. Originally outlawed in colonial America, Christmas trees did not become popular in the United States until the mid-1800s, possibly due to the influence of German and Irish immigrants. While Christmas has become more secular since then, some Christians still enjoy keeping their trees up until Epiphany to celebrate the baptism of Jesus, this year on January 5th 2025.

No matter how you celebrate after New Year's, if you choose to keep your tree in your house, be sure to water it frequently, turn off lights when they are not in use, and avoid burning candles near the tree. When the needles begin to dry out, even with regular waterings, remove all decorations and hardware, and plan to dispose of the tree.

Many towns in Connecticut provide residents with services to help dispose of Christmas trees. In some towns, you may be able to leave it on the curb with garbage and recycling but check with your waste disposal service to be sure. A more environmentally friendly option would be to take the tree to a local transfer station, where trees may be converted to mulch at little to no cost.

While a tempting disposal solution, it is not recommended to use Christmas trees as firewood for indoor fireplaces. The wood has a high sap content that may burn quickly and generate lots of smoke. The burnt sap also leaves a highly flammable residue in chimneys, which could cause fires. Burning the wood in an outdoor firepit may also pose danger. Even if properly “seasoned” – For most woods, this could take up to a year – softwoods such as pine, spruce, and fir generally burn hotter and faster than other types of wood, which both poses a safety hazard and makes them inefficient at generating heat relative to hardwoods. Overall, it is not advised to burn your Christmas tree to dispose of it.



Home gardeners may enjoy composting their Christmas tree. Conifer needles generally have a higher lignin content relative to deciduous leaves, grass clippings, or food scraps so they may take a while to break down in a compost pile. The process can be sped up by either chipping the tree or chopping it into smaller pieces before adding it to a compost pile. Even though the needles themselves are reasonably acidic, their pH is neutralized by microbes that decompose them, so adding a Christmas tree to your pile will not acidify the compost. While slower to decompose, lignin is a great source of carbon and can slowly feed the pile for several months.

Christmas trees and evergreen branches can be added to brush piles to serve as winter habitat for local critters. Photo by Marie Woodward

Patronizing your local Connecticut tree farm helps keep tree farmers in business and supports growth of new trees. The Nature Conservancy, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization focused on environmental conservation, reports that for each Christmas tree cut down, tree farmers usually plant 1-3 saplings. This makes Christmas tree farms excellent sustainable carbon sinks. Start off 2025 with a resolution to adopt more environmentally friendly practices by recycling your Christmas tree this January!

If you have questions about recycling your Christmas trees, or for other gardening questions, contact the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, visit their web site at www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.