

Living Holiday Tree

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Have you ever considered purchasing a tree to serve as a Holiday tree that could then become part of the landscape as a shade tree or decorative plant? If you pick the right species of tree it is relatively easy to be successful with the idea. I speak with experience because I have both a Deodora cedar and Arizona cypress that are over 20 feet tall serving as specimen trees in the front yard that started out as 5 feet tall living Christmas trees over 10 years ago.

The Deodora cedar is a desirable choice because it grows to a conical shape with attractive bluish needles that resemble a Colorado spruce. At one point I would have predicted that a Deodora cedar used as a specimen tree in a San Antonio landscape had a good chance for the growing point to be freeze damaged, but now with climate change there is probably less chance of damage. Even if the growing point does freeze back from an exceptional freeze, the remaining tree is attractive addition to a San Antonio landscape.

Arizona cypress is another excellent choice as a tree to be decorated as a Holiday tree and then be planted into the landscape. They have a classic conical shape and bluish evergreen foliage. Arizona cypress is especially well adapted for our alkaline soil and erratic rainfall conditions. It is a worthy addition to a xeriscape landscape.

Other tree species that work as trees to decorate for the Holidays and then can be planted in the permanent landscape include the Aleppo and Italian stone pines. They are available as sheared specimens at area nurseries. Aleppo pine grows to 40 feet tall with a classic narrow upright pine shape. Italian stone pine grows to 35 tall. It has a wider more bulbous crown than the Aleppo pine. It does especially well when planted in caliche or other rocky soil.

Leyland cypress and blue point juniper also make good holiday trees that will prosper in area landscapes as small trees. Avoid the acid-loving pines such as Virginia and loblolly pine. Afghan (Eldarica) pine is adapted to alkaline soils but is susceptible to a fungal dieback in our area. It is another species to avoid.

As desirable as getting double value for your holiday tree is, there are some issues to consider.

A live holiday tree is very heavy, so plan your moves ahead of purchasing the tree. Have the two-wheeled cart ready and your route to its site planned out. Selection at the nursery is best in November and early December, but the tree should only be inside the house for two weeks. If you buy it early, place it in morning sun outside until you are ready to move it inside. Keep the tree well-watered. Add water when the soil dries to one inch. Use a tray under the container so that enough water can be added to reach and leave the drain holes. In the house, avoid locations in front of heat registers or air conditioning vents.

In the landscape, select a final planting site in full sun. Dig the hole to the depth of the root ball and two or three times as wide. Refill the hole with the native soil. Root starters and other soil additives are

unnecessary. Place 3 to 4 inches of mulch over the root system and water when the soil under the mulch dries to 1 inch. Fertilize with a cup of slow release lawn fertilizer (19- 5-9) every February. Spread it over the entire root system and beyond the root system by 1 foot.