

Double Duty Holiday Trees

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If you like the idea of having an attractive evergreen to decorate for the holidays and then planting it in your landscape, check out the sheared trees in containers that many area nurseries offer. They work well if you pick the right species and plan adequately. The best trees for the purpose are Italian stone pine and Aleppo pine but Deodora cedar, Arizona cypress, and the ornamental junipers also work.

Another option is to use a sheared rosemary plant for a Holiday tree. It is an especially good choice for an apartment or condo where it can graduate to an attractive container plant on the balcony or patio after the Holidays

Italian stone pine, *Pinus pinea*, grows to 35 feet tall. It is a relatively slow grower and is drought tolerant. The Italian stone pine in the nursery is sheared to form a perfect conical shape, but as the tree grows into its more natural form, it forms a dense globe and eventually an umbrella crown. Plant Italian stone pine on a well-drained site. Caliche and rocky soil is ideal. If your soil is heavy clay, select a location on a slope or upland, not a low spot.

Aleppo pine, *Pinus halepensis*, is the large pine that was planted all over Lackland Air Force Base. They are tall (40 feet or more). They grow faster than the Italian stone pine and have more upright open growth habit.

Deodora cedar, *Cedrus deodora*, is my favorite of the live holiday trees. It has soft-looking blue-green needles that resemble a Colorado blue spruce except with more of a weeping configuration. The tree is very beautiful in the landscape. Unfortunately, it is also somewhat cold sensitive, and many of the Deodora cedars that lived through the 1983 and 1989 winters have killed tops. I include Deodora cedar in the desirable category despite this cold sensitivity because the extreme cold we experienced in 1983 and 1989 was unusual (even more so with global warming!), and, more importantly, a top-killed Deodora is still an attractive landscape tree.

Other species that work well are Arizona cypress and “Blue Point” juniper. The Deodora cedar and Arizona cypress are not sheared but some specimens have a naturally attractive shape. Avoid the acid-loving pines such as the Virginia pine and loblollys! Afghan pines grow well in alkaline soil but are susceptible to a life-shortening fungal dieback.

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 mapped out. Selection at the nursery is best early in 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. Do not waste your money on root starters or other unnecessary soil additives. 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.