

In search of the perfect Christmas tree, or “the one that got away”

by Doug Newbould

If you are like me, you are starting to think about getting a Christmas tree. If you are a procrastinator like me you'll probably chew on the idea for a couple of weeks, or at least until your wife goads you into action. Some folks like to put up their tree right after Thanksgiving. Personally, I like to keep my holidays separate. Seeing Christmas decorations or listening to, “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” the day after Halloween tends to make me grumpy. I'm actually starting to think Scrooge wasn't such a bad guy after all.

Of course, I'm kidding—at least about the Scrooge part. Actually, getting a tree in Alaska (at least in the parts of Alaska where trees are abundant) couldn't be much easier—or cheaper. Many of the public land managers here in south-central Alaska including the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, the Alaska Division of Forestry and the Chugach National Forest, allow folks to go out and collect a free-use Christmas tree.

And yes, there are some rules you must follow to take advantage of this privilege. I'll tell you how you can get a tree from the Refuge, but if you want to collect a tree on state or national forest lands you need to contact those agencies directly. The rules for cutting an Xmas tree on the Refuge are: select a tree that is at least 150 feet (50-70 adult paces) from refuge roads, trails, campgrounds, facilities and waters (lakes, rivers, creeks, etc); no cutting is allowed at Refuge Headquarters or on Ski Hill Road; cut the tree as close to the ground as possible (please, no topping); and you may take only one tree per household.

Those are the only official requirements for cutting a Christmas tree on the Refuge. However, I would like to suggest a few unofficial rules or conservation alternatives. Consider this—since spruce bark beetles have wiped out most of the white spruce in South-central Alaska, it only makes sense that we try to protect any remaining white spruce seedlings and saplings. So alternatively, you could buy a nice tree from a local nursery or commercial Christmas tree lot. Or, have you ever thought about an artificial tree? I have seen

some very attractive artificial trees in recent years and you can get them in just about any size, shape or color. And with artificial trees, you don't have to worry about sap or needles on your floors. If it's the scent of fresh spruce, fir or pine you crave, you can buy pine oil or scented candles to sweeten the air in your home.

But if you really want to cut a live tree, please consider cutting a black spruce instead. Black spruce are plentiful on the Kenai Peninsula and are rarely infested by spruce bark beetles. If you are not sure how to tell the difference between white and black spruce, here's a quick dendrology lesson. Black spruce (*Picea mariana*) usually have shorter needles (1/4 to 5/8 inch versus 1/2 - 3/4 inch) than white spruce (*Picea glauca*). Black spruce also have smaller cones (5/8 to 1 1/4 inch vs. 1 1/4 to 2 1/2 inch). Black spruce twigs tend to be covered with short reddish, brown or black hairs while white spruce twigs are hairless and orange brown in color.

If you are still unsure about the species, try taking a tree from an area where live spruce saplings are plentiful or are growing closely together. Consider taking a tree that has been damaged by weather or animals. I sometimes look for trees with forked, broken or multiple tops. Another conservation idea is to take a tree from an area that is periodically cleared, such as a power line right-of-way. Perhaps one of your neighbors needs to remove some trees from his or her property to create defensible space?

Wherever you go, please be sure you are on the land where you have permission to cut a tree. And if you find that perfect Christmas tree out there somewhere, wouldn't it be great to tell your grandkids about the one that got away—while you enjoy a picnic lunch in its shade?

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