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THE GRAPEVINE

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WHAT TO DO WITH THE CHRISTMAS TREE???

After the holidays, many municipalities allow old Christmas trees to be placed curbside. Trees are then collected and ground up for mulch or burned. If you miss the designated date, or your trash collector doesn't accept trees, there are several options to prolong the useful life of the tree.

An old Christmas tree can be used to benefit birds, fish, and the landscape by placing it in a corner of your deck, and spreading some birdseed nearby, or tying it to a deciduous tree or post near a bird feeder. The birds benefit from having escape cover nearby when hawks or cats threaten, and the dense boughs reduce the wind chill on a cold night. Sinking your Christmas tree in a pond is an easy way to improve fish habitat and fishing. The tree serves as little coral reef, in that the branches provide substrate for water plants to grow, and cover for minnows and other forms of small aquatic life. Larger fish are drawn by the shade and the presence of prey. How do you sink a tree? Tie the base to a cinder block with a short, stout rope, and toss it in. Just be sure to get permission from the pond owner first! Using the little tree around the landscape requires clipping off all of the branches. Use the boughs to add extra insulation around semi-hardy perennials or to trees and shrubs that were recently planted. The leftover trunk may be used as a garden stake next spring. Or cut and let it dry for a few weeks, and you will have some easy lighting firewood. Just beware that most conifer species tend to spark and pop more than hardwoods, as resin pockets in the wood make tiny explosions. This can delight the youngsters, but for safety's sake, keep an eye on the fire when burning Christmas tree logs!

Care of Gift Fruit Baskets

A holiday tradition is to give gifts of fruits and nuts (along with other products). Usually these are placed in an attractive basket, wrapped with cellophane covering, and brought (or shipped) to your house. It is important that the fruit contained inside is kept in cool conditions to maintain its quality for as long as possible. Thus, it is wise to disassemble the fruit basket as soon as you receive it and place the fruit in refrigerated storage. If all the products in the basket are tree fruits (such as apples, pears, oranges or grapefruit), you can place the entire basket in a cool place-around 40 degrees F. If the basket contains any bananas or other tropical fruits (with the exception of citrus), remove those fruits and store them separately. About 3-4 weeks is about as long as you can expect to store these fruits without some shriveling and loss of crispness.

Storing Pecans and Other Nuts

During the holiday season, pecans and other nuts are commonly given as gifts or purchased for holiday cooking. Nuts can quickly lose quality if not stored properly. Excessive water loss can lead to shriveled nutmeats, and the fats and oils in nuts can quickly spoil - developing an off-flavor or rancid taste. Store shelled (or unshelled nuts) in the refrigerator, or preferably the freezer. Nuts quickly absorb flavors from other stored products, so store them in a tightly sealed container so they won't lose water or absorb flavors from other fruits or vegetables. A solid

plastic container with a tightly fitting lid is preferred. You can use a heavy grade resealable plastic bag as well. If nutmeats are tightly sealed, they can be stored in a freezer for up to one year, but using them within six months is preferred.

Storing Power Equipment for the Winter

Late fall or early winter is a good time to service power equipment such as mowers, tillers and garden tractors. Run the equipment out of gas or treat the existing gas with a stabilizer as untreated gas can deteriorate over time. If using a stabilizer, run the engine long enough for untreated gas in the carburetor bowl to be burned and replaced. This is also a good time to replace the oil (and filter, if present) since the engine is warm. Check and replace the spark plug if necessary. Some gardeners will also apply a light, sprayable oil into the cylinder through the spark plug hole. Check and clean air filters and replace if necessary.

Many mowers and tillers will have a foam prefilter that can become filthy with use. If allowed to become too dirty, engines will run poorly or may not run at all. Sharpen blades, clean tines, tighten screws, replace broken parts and do all the other things needed to keep equipment in good shape. Though such maintenance takes some time and effort, it pays for itself by reducing frustration and lost time due to poorly performing equipment during a hectic spring.

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