

Dispelling Myths About the Real Christmas Trees

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I came across an interesting article published by Michigan State University (MSU) Christmas Tree Extension, *Four Lessons from COVID-19 for the Future of Christmas Tree Marketing* (Behe & Malone, 2021). The authors of this study surveyed 1350 Americans about their Christmas traditions and beliefs. What stood out to me concerned consumers' beliefs about real Christmas trees. Specifically, their beliefs of the dangers and the environmental impact of real Christmas trees (see table 1). These beliefs held by consumers are very concerning. Specifically given that younger consumers consider environmental sustainability an important factor when making a purchase decision (Haller et al., 2020).

Statement	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed
Purchasing a live Christmas tree is environmentally friendly.	36.3%	38.6%	25.1%
Cutting a tree for Christmas decoration is not environmentally responsible.	39.2%	38.5%	22.3%
Live Christmas trees are more dangerous than artificial trees because they can catch on fire.	55%	31%	14%

Table 1. (Behe & Malone, 2021)

First let's look into the data to see if real Christmas trees are a greater fire hazard than artificial trees. The National Fire Protection Association states that between 2014 and 2018 approximately 160 house fires were caused by Christmas trees catching fire annually. Of those, 15% were intentionally set, 45% were caused by an electrical disruption or faulty lighting, and 22% was caused by a heating source or a candle placed too close to the tree (Ahrens & Maheshwari, 2020). Unfortunately, this data does not clearly differentiate between artificial and real trees. Though, by examining the data on "type of material first ignited" the authors determined that one third of these fires occurred in artificial trees (Ahrens & Maheshwari, 2020). Thus, if you deduct the fires started deliberately and those involving fake Christmas trees only 95 real Christmas trees were involved in structure fires a year, and of those most were caused by

faulty lighting and heat sources. To put this number into context, the National Christmas Tree Association estimates that 25-30million real Christmas trees were sold in the US every year (The National Christmas Tree Association, n.d.).

You can't talk about Christmas tree fires without discussing proper tree care. It's of no surprise that a dry tree is a fire hazard. Thankfully by caring for the trees post-harvest and encouraging your costumers to properly care for their tree at home internal tree moisture can be maintained. The basics being watering, making a fresh cut on the butt, and keeping the tree away from a direct a heat source (Chastagner & Hinesley, n.d.). "Fresh Christmas trees, if properly watered and maintained, are not a fire hazard and are very difficult to ignite with a point source of flame."(Chastagner & Hinesley, 2016). Direct your costumers to the National Christmas Tree association's website for a comprehensive list of septs to take to care for their tree (<https://realchristmastrees.org/all-about-trees/care-tips/>)

As we all know the debate has been ongoing for years whether real or fake Christmas trees are better for the environment. In short the answer to this question is dependent on many different factors including end of life disposal, transportation distance, and the imputes used to grow the trees (Jean-Sébastien Trudel, Sylvain Couillard, 2009; Murphy et al., 2010). On average, a costumer would need to keep an artificial tree for 8 to 9 years in order to achieve a comparable carbon footprint with natural trees (Murphy et al., 2010).

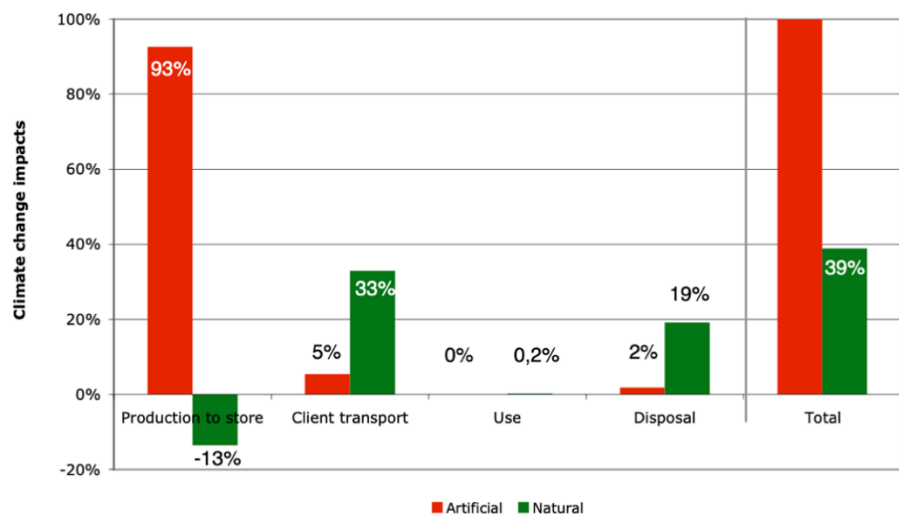


Figure 1 Life Cycle Assessment results for Climate Change stemming from a natural Christmas tree and an artificial charismas tree used for 6 years (Jean-Sébastien Trudel, Sylvain Couillard, 2009).

Perhaps surprising to some, would be that client transportation and the manner in which a real Christmas trees is disposed accounts for roughly half of their lifecycle climate change impacts (Jean-Sébastien Trudel, Sylvain Couillard, 2009). Thus, if consumers are concerned about the impacts a Christmas tree has on the climate the extent to which a real Christmas tree is sustainable is dependent on their actions post purchase (Jean-Sébastien Trudel, Sylvain Couillard, 2009).



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Thankfully it is becoming easier for consumers to dispose of their real Christmas trees that does not involve a trip to the landfills. Real Christmas trees can be incinerated for energy production, composted, or mulched to be used in public places. Other ingenious end of life uses for real Christmas trees include being used for erosion protection and being sunk in bodies of water to provide fish habitat (RHEA, 2020).

Knowing something to be true and proving it is true are very different. As a grower you've known for years real Christmas trees are better for the environment than a fake tree. We also know that Christmas trees don't spontaneously combust. As an industry we need to continue to communicate to consumers their role in ensuring real Christmas trees are neither a danger in the home or to the environment. This can be accomplished through online, or print add marketing initiatives. Perhaps the easiest option being to providing consumers with a small infographic card at the point of purchase detailing how to care for their tree at home, and how to properly dispose of their tree after the Christmas season.

Resources

- Ahrens, M., & Maheshwari, R. (2020). *Christmas Tree Fires*. NFPA's Applied Research
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- RHEA, D. (2020). *Christmas Trees: A Gift for the Fish*. Penn State Extension. <https://extension.psu.edu/christmas-trees-a-gift-for-the-fish>
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