

TUOLUMNE RESIDENTS LIVE IN A FOREST OF (CHRISTMAS) TREES

by Joan Bergsund

Christmas trees are much on my mind. A recent column written by master gardener program coordinator, Rebecca Miller-Cripps, urged us to recycle the trees and told where and how to take them to the nearest facility. For most of us, it takes a week or more to un-trim the tree and get the ornaments packed away for another year. It's such fun to put the tree up, and such hard work to take it down. Rarely does anyone want to help, so the task often falls to Mom.

But had you noticed? We lucky people in Tuolumne County actually live among Christmas trees all year long. In the high country particularly we are surrounded by pines, firs, cedars, spruce, junipers and even redwoods. Any view toward the mountains will include one or more of the conifers. Take time to look!

I love seeing the young families together in the hills or in the lots, selecting the perfect tree for their holiday homes. Shortly after Thanksgiving you begin to see cars with trees tied to the roofs. It always makes me smile. Begun long ago in Germany, the Christmas tree is a grand, though pagan, tradition we in America have happily adopted. Many people purchase living trees, balled up in burlap, suitable for a short stay indoors and waiting to be planted when danger of frost has passed. Master gardeners are particularly committed to this style of celebration. Like having your cake and eating it too, the tree adds to the holiday decor and can still be added to the landscape.

For several years after moving to Sonora we cut Christmas trees from our property. There were a number of gray pines, or *Pinus sabiniana*, and they were scraggly specimens at best. But they made interesting and humorous Christmas trees, of the Charlie Brown variety, and when loaded with family ornaments and old fashioned tinsel (my husband's favorite) made the grade. One small grandson, however, after studying the tree, stated, "Grandma, you don't have a very good tree." It's still a good way to thin or dispose of unwanted trees on your land.

Fast forward: for me personally, after many tall and stately trees over a lifetime of holidays, I now have a three-foot artificial tree, already strung with lights. It's a lot less work, and I like to think I am sparing a tree from the woodsman's ax. I decorate this small tree with tiny ornaments collected over time, and I sometimes leave the ornaments in place and simply encase the tree in a large plastic bag and store it on a shelf until next year. Is that a total cop-out?

One year, after the Thanksgiving dinner, the ping pong tournament, and Domino games which were Great Grandmother's favorite, I brought out the little tree, plugged it in, and with the box of small ornaments nearby asked my four young grandchildren to decorate the tree. They loved it, and before they had disappeared to drive back to their homes, I was ready for Christmas.

More people are opting for the artificial tree every year. And each year they look more and more like the real thing. Better design and manufacturing techniques produce everything but the fragrance. As a master gardener should I be campaigning for a return to the real? I have not asked the owners of the local tree farms or the lot owners what their profits reveal. Perhaps this trend for the fake will continue. Even though I generally abhor anything artificial I must confess that I have two artificial pines on my front porch. The big pots on either side of my front door used to hold Dwarf Alberta Spruce. They needed water, of course, and my attention was not reliable. I was inspired one day by two fake pines at a local general store, bought them on impulse, sunk them in the pots and we've been happy together ever since. Being a student of Latin and proper botanical nomenclature, I have dubbed them "*Pinus pretendus*" much to the amusement of my friends and fellow gardeners.

So, gardeners of Tuolumne, perk up. Spring is coming – we have passed the winter solstice – and the days are getting longer. Soon we can again work in our gardens. Think water conservation, species adapted to our mountain conditions, and realistic appraisal of your energy level. Success will be

yours!

Joan Bergsund, master gardener since 1996, has just put away her holiday decorations until the next Christmas season.