

How green is your Christmas tree?

By Samantha Goff

Tribune Sentinel Staff

If you are living under a rock or on another planet, you may not have noticed that the holiday season has arrived in full force. It seems to come earlier and earlier every year. I only feel comfortable talking about Christmas now that we have made it through Thanksgiving!

It's time to start decking the halls and cutting down your Christmas tree!

Did I just say that, in a column about going green? Aren't we supposed to be talking about saving the trees here?

On a typical day, yes. Today, however, I felt it was important to share some truths about the impacts of the holidays on our environment. Specifically, the impact of the Christmas tree.

If you are at all like me you probably think you are doing the world a favor by not buying or going to cut down a real Christmas tree.

Until recently, I thought it was totally unnecessary and a waste of trees and wondered how anyone could do that when they could just buy one fake tree at the store and use it for a few years. It reasonably sounds like the better choice. Right?

Wrong. Artificial trees are actually more harmful to our environment than cutting or purchasing a new real tree annually.

The typical artificial tree is made up of metals and PVC. This causes them to be non-recyclable and non biodegradable. Even worse than that is that most older artificial trees were made using lead in the long list of their material/chemical makeup. Also, an astonishing 85 percent of the artificial trees in America are shipped here from China.

The gases produced in the process of making the trees, and the transportation to get them here leaves such a damaging effect on the environment.

Bummer huh? But the good news is, we can still have beautiful Christmas trees, it will just take more effort than unpacking several parts of the tree from the dirty box from the basement.

In the U.S. there are 33 million Christmas trees purchased annually. Out of those trees, 93 percent are recycled. There are approximately 350,000,000 trees growing on tree farms at any given time, and a single tree can absorb one ton of CO₂ emissions in its lifetime. I will let you do the math on how much CO₂ is absorbed through tree farms alone, as math is not my strongest area of expertise, but I do know that is a lot of CO₂ that is being absorbed. Aside from what they are absorbing, trees are a precious source of oxygen to our atmosphere. An acre of trees on a tree farm emit enough oxygen to supply 18 people for an entire day.

Christmas tree farms create over 100,000 jobs in America, which means they are helping our economic stand point by creating jobs, and also eliminating the transportation over seas, decreasing their impact on the atmosphere and consumption of resources needed for shipping.

Depending upon where you live, a Christmas tree may still have to be delivered by way of train or truck, but the impact is far less than the impact of shipment from overseas.

Most tree farmers, in order to ensure a healthy and abundant supply for future Christmases, plant at least one new tree, but usually plant two or three new trees for every harvested tree.

Unfortunately, most live trees do have to be sprayed with pesticides and herbicides, so choosing an organically grown, or a wild tree would be the most green efficient.

The carbon neutral nature of their production, the investment in a US product, the recyclability of a real tree make them the “green” option of the trees for Christmas this year.

They say it would take 22 years to get the “appropriate” use out of an artificial tree when all of the resources used, and gas emissions through manufacturing and transportation factors are calculated, and even after the 22 years, the tree is still not recyclable or biodegradable so it will sit in a landfill for centuries of Christmases past your measly 22 years of ownership.

Getting the tree home, needing to water it, and having to sweep up the needles seems pretty painless to think about, considering the alternative and its negative impact on the environment.

If you already own an artificial tree, you should take the best care of it you can to use it as long a possible. Or if you are like me and own a hand me down (in my case one half of an old hand me down artificial tree—lucky for us its the top half) this year the choice is clear. Get real and go green!