

# Knockin' Around the Christmas Tree

To Survive the Annual Struggle, First Find the Right Stand

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I saw Mommy cussing Santa Claus.

And I saw it more than once. The screaming always commenced about 2 p.m. on the second Sunday in December, when my parents did battle with our live Christmas tree and its stingy, mean-spirited stand. It was a ghastly yuletide tradition, as predictable as Dad's annual tussle with the tangled ball of outdoor lights and my little brother counting the presents on Christmas morning to make sure he wasn't shortchanged.

He's 41 now, and I'm convinced he still keeps a tally of who gets how much each Dec. 25. But since my parents switched to a faux fir decades ago (cowards), it's now my wife and I who exchange snarls every year when it's time to pick, prune and position our live tree.

Oh, Christmas tree. What squabbling you inspire.

According to the National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA), based in Chesterfield, Mo., and charged with representing the live tree industry, Americans bought nearly 33 million needle-strewers last year. In doing so, they spent upward of \$1.4 billion for the privilege of scuffing their ceilings, gunking up their wood floors and soaking their carpeting with scummy, pine-scented water. Mostly, it translated into 33 million arguments about whether the treetop angel was askew.

And the root of all those tree troubles? That miserable, maddening stand.

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The author bearhugs the tree while his wife, Janet, gamely tries to position one of the tested tree stands beneath it. With some stands, the curse is worse. (By Bill O'leary -- The Washington Post)

## Brace Yourself, And Your Tree

We asked tree grower Clarke J. Gernon Sr., a spokesman for the National Christmas Tree Association, for advice on how to prepare your tree for its stand. Here's what he suggested.

- \* If it's been a while since the tree was cut down, recut the base to put the tree's vascular system in contact with water.
- \* Be sure to stand the tree in a bucket of water while it's waiting to be brought into the house.
- \* Don't whittle the base if the tree stand doesn't fit; that makes it harder for the tree to absorb water. Get a larger stand.
- \* Trim the lower branches if they prevent you from getting the trunk firmly planted in the base; cut limbs flush with the trunk, as you would if you were pruning a plant.
- \* Don't make a career out of setting the tree up. Get the job done before it dries out again.

"As an industry, we need to move away from some of the ineffective stands, because it detracts from using a real Christmas tree," says NCTA spokesman Clarke J. Gernon Sr., who notes that despite his group's best efforts, people still insist on buying fake trees (9.3 million in 2005). "But there are some really interesting stands on the market these days that simplify the process."

The owner of a tree farm in Pearl River, La., Gernon has witnessed his share of arboreal discord among customers at holiday time. "We thought about having marriage counseling at the exit of the farm, but I've never been able to come up with enough counselors -- and counselors who want to work weekends."


To allay some of the distress, Gernon said consumers should look for stands that can be readily adjusted and are big enough for their tree of choice. One key component is the water reservoir: You want one that's simple to fill and easy to detach from the trunk, which "cuts down on the mess issue" when you're taking the tree down. Some models, such as a three-legged wonder called the Standtastic, don't include an attached basin at all -- you have to supply it. That's actually a *good* thing.

My wife and I are on our third stand as a married couple, having firmly established in our wedding vows that we'd have a real tree till death do us part. (Live vs. fake? Please. It's like having to choose between a fine cabernet and Boone's Farm.)

We started with the cheapo metal model that defined those Christmases of yesteryear. You know the one: It has little green legs that poke through the sides of a red bowl, with four hard-to-tighten screws that cause pain when you try to secure the trunk. If I hold one up to my ear, I can still hear my mom yelling.

That one lasted only a few years. As Gernon says, "They can drive you nuts, putting those things together." I can't disagree.

John Deiner



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Our upgrade was a large green plastic stand with four tightening bolts. It worked fine until Earl Gray, the cat, ascended an unstable pine in 2002 and toppled it over. We blamed the stand, not the feline. Today, there's a hole marking the spot where we stuck an eye hook in the wall and attached an emergency tether to the mangled tree.

The following year, using the same stand (yes, we're just that bright), a crack developed in the water reservoir and doused a pile of wrapped presents. Fortunately, the fissure didn't go deep enough to empty the bowl, but that stand joined the tree in the trash a few weeks later.

Now we use a stand with a swiveling base. Stick the trunk in a holding fixture, plop the fixture into the base, depress a foot pedal to swivel the tree into correct position, and we're done. Sort of. Crooked trees seem to be drawn to us, because even swiveling doesn't get the things as straight as we want.

We're not even close to exhausting all of the choices available, as misty-eyed dreamers continue their quest for the perfect tree stand. A surprising number of their designs feature the words "last stand" -- Bowling's Last Stand, Grinnen's Last Stand, etc. -- but that just brings to mind Custer's Last Stand, and we all know how that turned out.

(Not that all Last Stands are created equal: Bowling's is an industrial-strength steel bin with large, easy-to-turn bolts, while Grinnen's looks like a medieval torture device featuring a ratchet and an ingenious adjustment mechanism.)

Other newfangled stands sport a long pin in the center of a pan. The tree is drilled with a tapered bit, and the tree locks into the pin by friction. While by many accounts dependable, the stands are only usable if you get your tree from a farm or shop that has the specialized drill.

One of the newest stands on the market was designed by Grant Eckenswiller, president of Omega Plastics in Ontario, Canada. It's red and green (of course), plastic and disassembles in about 30 seconds.

"We call it a 'marriage saver,' " he says. "I never had a real tree until I met my wife -- and with that came the struggles, and stringing the tree up to the wall."

Eckenswiller's design, which took more than six months to perfect, features a deep square base with clamps that replace the traditional blister-inducing screws. You place the tree on its side, secure it to the base, then prop it upright.

"My stand's not the cheapest, and it doesn't hold the most water," he notes. "But it will hold the tree up better than most others."

Maybe so. But I'll have to let Earl Gray decide.

*For more information on live Christmas trees, check the National Christmas Tree Association's Web site at <http://www.christmastree.org>.*