

Holiday Fire Safety Tips

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Next month contains several religious holidays. Our houses often transform to accommodate decorations and seating arrangements for guests to gather in different parts of our homes. Unfortunately, when rearranging to accommodate our trimmings and guests, we often forget about fire safety. I have seen devastating results from people placing items too close to cooking devices or using candles during their religious celebration that started a fire within the home.

The Christian holiday is often celebrated with Christmas trees. The decision to decorate your home with an artificial or natural tree should be done with thought and preparation. Many consumers believe that an artificial tree will eliminate or reduce the chance for a fire in their home. Unfortunately, this is not exactly true. We have all seen videos of a natural Christmas tree fire. The fire often grows so fast that the room can reach flashover temperatures in under a minute.

Natural Christmas trees, by their nature, are initially fire retardant. I have set up Christmas tree demonstrations intentionally lighting a natural tree and an artificial tree on fire at the same time with an amazing fire resulting with the artificial tree and minimal fire growth in the natural tree. The problem with natural trees is when they are cut down and packaged without access to water for extended periods they dry out. Consumers need to purchase a fresh tree and handle the tree correctly after they buy it. The trunk (butt) of the tree will need a fresh cut on the bottom and then immediately (as soon as possible) be placed in water. The species of natural Christmas trees and the rate of moisture loss are important factors in determining the extent of moisture loss. Of the various types of evergreen trees available, the Nobel fir retains its moisture longer than other species. Natural trees have to be checked and watered daily. When needles shed easily, the tree should be removed or replaced, since trees dry from the inside out.

When it comes to artificial trees, consumers are often misled by the tree packaging or advertisements that identify the tree or tree materials as "flame retardant." These claims infer a certain level of fire performance, and can give consumers a false sense of safety. Research has shown that some artificial trees can contribute to rapid fire growth in a room in a manner similar to that of a dried out natural tree.

The Christmas tree tradition in the United States dates back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when immigrants from Germany, England and other European countries brought holiday traditions from their native homelands to their adopted country. Artificial trees started being produced in the 1960s and had green plastic needles and branches composed of 100 percent polyvinylchloride (PVC) materials and other petrochemical based materials.

Statistics recorded by the National Fire Protection Association show that both natural and artificial trees were the major item ignited in an estimated average of 210 reported home structure fires each year. These home fires have reportedly resulted in an average of 7 civilian deaths and 19 injuries with \$17.5 million in property damage each year.

FIRE SAFETY TIPS FOR YOUR CHRISTMAS TREE:

- When picking out your Christmas tree, choose a tree with fresh green needles that do not fall off when touched.
- When placing your tree, make sure the tree is at least three feet away from any heat source, e.g. fireplaces, radiators, candles, heat vents or lights.
- When lighting your Christmas tree use lights that have a label of an independent testing laboratory and check to make sure the lights are not listed for outdoors only. Replace any string of lights with worn or broken cords or loose bulb connections and NEVER use candles to decorate the tree.



The information I have shared concentrated, for the most part, on Christmas trees, but the point is to be careful this holiday season no matter what traditions you and your family practice. The holidays are busy times, and we can leave candles unattended or forget we have food cooking while we are entertaining. I would like to wish everyone an enjoyable and safe holiday season and please remember to practice fire safety during this time of celebration and throughout the year.