

Evaluating the freshness of your Christmas tree

Christmas trees are perishable. Their freshness can be lost rapidly during a severe drying event or slowly over time through neglect. As a retailer, you should periodically evaluate the freshness of your product. Your decisions on how to handle and market your trees should rely on the information you collect from your evaluation. If you find that your trees are losing their freshness on the lot, you might be able to identify the conditions that are hurting your trees and better control them. If you are confident that your trees are holding up, you can help your customers to better appreciate their freshness.

There is a direct relationship between the amount of water in a tree and its freshness. Researchers use a couple of different methods to measure the amount of moisture in Christmas tree foliage, but they are time consuming. You can use several tree characteristics as a rough and ready indicator of tree freshness. These include tree color, needle retention, foliage temperature, branch and needle flexibility, and even tree weight.

To check how your trees are holding up on the retail lot, make the following observations:

- **How is the color of the tree?** Dry trees tend to lose color and develop a paler green or washed out appearance compared to fresh trees.
- **Does the tree hold its needles when you brush branches or shake the tree?** If more than a few current season needles drop, there could be a freshness problem with the tree. Losing some internal (older) needles is normal, but a tree should hold onto all of its younger needles on the outside of the tree. Needle loss is complex and can result from genetic variation, temperature extremes, high salt content in the tree aggravated by moisture loss, or a lack of dormancy of the tree resulting from unseasonably warm autumn weather.
- **Does the foliage of the tree feel cool to the touch?** A fresh tree with good water content will feel cooler than room or ambient outdoor temperature. A dry tree will feel warm in comparison. Of course, foliage in direct sunlight will be warmer, so be sure to compare foliage under similar conditions. You might do this early or late in the day when conditions will be more uniform from tree to tree.
- **Are the needles and branches pliant and flexible?** The needles on a fresh tree will bend with your touch and return to their normal position without breaking. The branches on a fresh tree will also easily bend and spring back to their resting position. Dry branches are stiff. Dry needles are brittle such that needle loss on dry trees is often from needle breakage.
- **How heavy is the tree compared to its neighbors?** Weight can be misleading if you are comparing different size or density trees. However, if the trees are similar, a dry tree will weigh less than a fresh tree flush with water. If other tree characteristics are pointing to a dry condition, lifting it up can confirm your evaluation.

While checking the freshness of your trees can be a fairly casual management tool, it can allow you to chart the condition of your trees over the retail season if you keep a record of your results. It can give you your own “freshness report card.” If you are doing a good job, your trees not only arrive fresh, but stay fresh, and sell fresh. If you have more than a few dry trees, you need to examine your tree care package. During hot dry retail seasons, you may have to improve tree care practices to still get an “A+” for freshness.