

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

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In order to sleep peacefully and dream of our gardens, we have to think about safety first. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission over 10,000 people visit emergency rooms during the holidays due to decorating injuries from falls, burns, cuts, and shocks. More than 200 fires are started each year because of dried out trees.

Every tree is the perfect tree at Christmas, especially if you have children who choose. To put the magic in your winter wonderland while keeping your family secure and protected, here are a few suggestions.

- Find the freshest tree to light up your yuletide. Whether you cut it yourself, or buy it from your favorite lot, look for a tree with green needles that are difficult to pull from the branch. The tree's bottom needs to be sticky with resin and needles should not fall off when the tree is shaken.
- Keep all trees, branches, and flammable decorations away from fireplaces, radiators, and high traffic areas.
- Hang stockings on chimneys only when there is no fire burning.
- Buy new lights that have been tested by the Underwriters Laboratory (UL). Make sure that lights for your garden are labeled as outdoor capable. All lights need good wiring, devoid of any broken or cracked sockets, frayed wires, or loose connections. Only use extension cords that are designed for the outdoors and beware of the number of light sets that may be attached.
- Never add electric lights to metallic ornamentations as you could be exposing yourself to electrocution.
- When climbing ladders, use the buddy system.

Besides the conifers that beckon Santa's visit, fruit bearing trees provide wondrous gifts of nature during December. Persimmons, quince, chestnuts, and pomegranates offer exotic flavors for holiday gastronomy. The delicious and juicy Hachiya persimmon is the perfect fruit to flavor many holiday dishes, including Christmas puddings and fruitcakes. These beautiful pointed persimmons resemble bright orange ornaments hanging on the bare branches. If they are firm when picked, allow them to sit on a plate on the counter until soft. They can then be enjoyed raw or cooked, but only when they are mushy. On the other hand, the Fuyu persimmon is flat, hard, and delicious eaten like an apple or sliced into salads. Once it gets soft, it can also be used in dishes that suggest Hachiya. When planting persimmons, keep in mind that it may take up to 10 years for a bountiful yield.



Like glittering ornaments, Hachiya persimmons hang on a winter tree.

Another tree that is offering holiday bounty is the quince. This hard fruit resembling an ugly apple was a sign of love and commitment in ancient Rome. In Greek mythology, quince was the gift from Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It has been speculated that the forbidden fruit that tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden was actually the quince, although quince is inedible raw. When cooked, the aroma smells like rose petals, and the color of the flesh turns amber. The taste is a combination of pear and apple. Mixed with cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg, quince is heavenly. The fruit is popular in Middle Eastern meat stews as well as British tarts and preserves.

"Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose" are the popular lyrics from the Christmas song that conjures up images and happy memories of by-gone holiday seasons. On the branch, the chestnut is encompassed inside a prickly shell that looks like a small yellow tennis ball with spikes. When the shell opens, out falls a shiny brown nut. For those who grow chestnuts, now is the time to gather the fallen fruit. Slit the skin with a serrated knife (use caution as the shell is tough), blanch, roast, wrap in a cloth for five minutes before eating. **BEWARE:** the nuts from horse chestnuts and buckeyes are poisonous. They look like chestnuts but are not edible to humans or animals.

Pomegranates have symbolized hope, prosperity, fertility, and eternal life for over 4,000 years. Today they are

heralded as a 'superfood,' low in calories, high in antioxidants, vitamin C, potassium, and fiber. When planted in a sunny location, the small 6- to 12-foot tree is easy to grow with green glossy foliage and pretty orange flowers in summer and fall. When the fruit is red it is ripe and ready to be eaten raw. Cut the crown to remove the yellow pith while scoring the skin in quarters. Immerse the scored fruit in a large bowl of cold water. Holding the fruit under the water, break it into sections. The seeds will fall to the bottom of the bowl. Drain, dry, and enjoy.

Be prepared for sticker shock when you purchase any of these Christmas treats. Persimmons and pomegranates cost \$2-4 each in the produce aisle. Perhaps it's time to write a letter to Ole' St. Nick to put in a request for these special trees or other garden gadgets. What do you want or need for your garden? A gazing ball, purple rhododendron, pair of shears, birdbath, a money tree? He's making a list and checking it twice. December is the month for dreams to come true. Tie your Christmas to the outdoors. Let there be light!

Peace on earth. Good will to all. Be a child again on Christmas morning. May your stockings be filled with the seeds of winter wonders, hope, and love.



A live cypress tree in a container is a great replacement for cutting a tree.