



Lovely Christmas Tree Alternatives
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Are you longing for the beauty and appeal of a traditional Christmas tree, in a size that will work well in a smaller space? Every year more options are available, and two of the best are rosemary and Norfolk Island pine. They can be found at many nurseries and big box stores, and their smaller scale is ideal for a tabletop in an apartment, nursing home or hospital room, or for someone who just wants an easy-care holiday plant.

Rosemary -- This time of year, you can often find rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*) sheared into a pyramid shape to resemble a mini Christmas tree. Its fresh scent is invigorating in the middle of winter, and its leaves can be a savory addition to stews and roasts. Place it in bright light in a south or west-facing window. The more light, the better, or it tends to drop leaves. Keep the soil evenly moist by checking the pot every few days. The most common mistake with rosemary is under-watering; rosemary doesn't like to dry out completely. After Christmas, you can move it outside and plant it as soon as your area is frost-free, usually in early May. Plant it in a sunny location, fertilize it every few months with a slow-release, pellet-type product, and let it grow naturally. You don't need to maintain the topiary or pyramidal shape unless you prefer to.

Norfolk Island pine -- The Norfolk Island pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) is another nice choice for a live Christmas tree. It is a long-lasting tropical plant native to the South Pacific, and must remain indoors during the winter months. Like rosemary, it makes a great tabletop tree for wherever space is limited. Smaller ornaments and mini lights are recommended when decorating Norfolk Island pines because their branches cannot sustain the weight of heavier ornaments. Remove decorations promptly after the holidays to prevent damage to needles and branches.

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The biggest advantage of a Norfolk Island pine is that it can grow indoors for many years. It prefers bright, mostly indirect light. It is temperamental with respect to soil moisture -- never wanting to be too wet or too dry. Consistent and thorough watering when the top of the soil dries out will help ensure longevity. Increased humidity in the winter also is necessary to keep the plant thriving indoors. You can take a potted tree outdoors in late spring if you like, but keep it in a shaded spot. Bring it inside before temperatures drop to 40 F.

If properly placed and watered, a Norfolk Island pine is fairly easy to maintain, preferring more neglect than nurture. It requires little fertilization -- watering with a soluble fertilizer once a month in spring and summer should be sufficient. It also prefers to be a bit pot-bound, meaning that it does not require repotting every year. Repotting into a slightly larger container with a well-drained commercial potting mix every four years should be adequate. A Norfolk Island pine will let you know if something is wrong in its environment; if conditions do not meet its liking, the lower limbs may turn yellow or brown and fall off prematurely.

Popcorn, cranberries, pinecones, paperchains, paper stars, and orange slices are attractive decorations for your mini Christmas tree. Putting them together is a wonderful family project, and using them to decorate one of these two plants makes for a lovely and affordable gift tree for someone you love.

Due to the pandemic, Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future continue to be limited. We realize our public classes are valued by county residents and we are doing our best to provide virtual learning opportunities. We currently have no events scheduled, but you can find our recorded classes on many gardening topics here:

https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Public_Education_Classes/Handouts_-_Presentations/.

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, is open to the public open twice monthly from November to March: 1st Saturday -- Monthly 9 a.m. - 12 p.m. and 2nd Saturday -- 9:00 - 12 p.m.. State and county public health guidelines require us to limit visitors to ten at a time (including our docents) and ask that they practice social distancing and wear face coverings. Restrooms will not be open.

Check http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information.

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the "Ask a Master Gardener" option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.