

The Sensible Environmentalist

(NAPS)—Dear Dr. Moore:

Is it environmentally friendlier to have a real or an artificial Christmas tree?



Dr. Moore

I often say that one way to protect the environment is to choose renewable materials and energy wherever possible. Artificial trees are made from non-renewable plastics and petroleum-based products. Although some people claim that these trees last a lifetime, most are thrown away within nine years—and remain in landfill sites for centuries. For me the choice isn't real or artificial, but whether to buy a cut tree or one that's growing in a pot, which I can plant outside after the holidays.

Some of the environmental benefits of real Christmas trees:

- They're recyclable. Most communities offer recycling programs through parks departments or as part of existing curbside pickup. After the holidays, trees are chipped into biodegradable mulch, which can be used for playgrounds, gardens, hiking trails and animal stalls. Whole trees are also used on beaches to prevent shore erosion, and in lakes, streams and ponds to provide hiding spots and feeding areas for fish.

- They grow back. North American forests cover about the same area of land as they did 100 years ago and, in the last decade, have actually expanded by nearly 10 million acres. For every tree harvested, up to three more are planted to ensure a steady supply year after year.

- Growing forests are an important part of the fight against global warming. Put simply, trees grow by taking carbon dioxide (CO₂) out of the atmosphere and releasing clean oxygen. This helps to offset the CO₂ released into the environment when we burn fossil fuels such as coal, oil and natural gas. (That said, trees can only do so much. To reverse the effects of global warming, it is vital that we also reduce fossil fuel consumption.)

As for potted trees, they need quite a lot of care to ensure survival. Talk to a greenhouse about species that are native to the area and specific care instructions.

Whether you choose a cut or growing tree to enjoy this holiday season, I believe that a sensible environmentalist would opt for renewable over non-renewable every time.

Dr. Patrick Moore has been a leader of the environmental movement for more than 30 years. A co-founder and former president of Greenpeace, he holds a PhD in ecology and a BSc in forest biology. Questions for Dr. Moore can be sent to Patrick@SensibleEnvironmentalist.com.