

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 12-18-02) , ©2005

Sometimes people ask me where I get my column ideas. As a gardener and Horticulture Coordinator most of the time the topics literally leap into my brain while I'm gardening or perusing some other horticulture-related pastime. However, this week my hairdresser Jennifer Morrow gave me my inspiration while she was trimming my hair.

Jennifer and Mark Morrow have a pet Norfolk Pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*). She calls the tree "He." Their pet plant lives in the house part of the year and gets a treat outside during the summer and autumn. This time of year "He" becomes a Christmas tree resplendent in lights and tiny ornaments.

Mark is the designated waterer. "He's in charge of spritzing it every day and waters it every week," says Jennifer, "He won't let me do it." It's been their tree for seven or eight years and is now six feet tall. "It grows about five to six inches a year." Jennifer says.

Their tree is strung with tiny white lights and holds about two dozen ornaments. It's contained in a big plastic terra cotta pot. "It's kinda a Charlie Brown tree, not a glitzy fluffy pom pom tree," says Jennifer.

Morrows also keep the tree away from heating vents. They also wait until late May (after danger of any frost) to put the tree outside and bring it in during September or mid-October each year (again before frost).

Norfolk Island pine is native to Norfolk Island (in the Southern Pacific, east of Australia) and found throughout the South Pacific islands. The conifer can actually grow to heights of 190 feet or taller preferring moist, cool temperatures of 70 degrees in summer and 40s in winters in its natural environment. Norfolks won't mind light shade or filtered light making them an ideal houseplant lasting many years as long as the misting and regular watering is given on a consistent basis. The tree will survive in bright, indirect light too. Don't place it too near a sunny window though.

If you have a Norfolk pine with overly drooping branches it may be getting too little light, poor air circulation or is too warm. Try to keep your tree out of drying drafts. When watering, empty the saucer. Water thoroughly but avoid having the plant sitting in water. Fertilize your tree once a month with a balanced houseplant fertilizer from April through August.

One website I visited at www.FloridaGardener.com read, "We do not suggest planting these giants in a yard of less than an acre." Oops Jennifer and Mark lookout! The site also says the trees can grow four-inch long cones. I think the tree needs a real name though, don't you?

Years ago when our kids came home from college we had to wait until around December 18 to buy our Christmas tree. If you don't have your tree yet (or really like to plan ahead

for next year) visit www.PSCTA.org the website for the Puget Sound Christmas Tree Association Inc. You'll find a map of all the you-cut Christmas Tree farms in Puget Sound. Included are phone numbers and an assortment of information. If you don't have Internet access stop by the Cooperative Extension Office at 715 Sidney in Port Orchard and pick up a free copy of the PSCTA booklet.

Washington State University has researched the water-holding capacity of Christmas tree stands. Dr. Gary Chastagner discovered that "Cut Christmas trees generally consume about one quart of water per day per inch of stem diameter. A tree with a four-inch diameter trunk would use about four quarts of water per day." The WSU report shows the results of the study testing twenty-two different stands on trees with trunk diameters from two through nine inches. Call (360-337-7157) or visit the Extension Office to obtain copies of Chastagner's report.

Don't forget to visit Bainbridge Gardens' Illumination Festival Holiday Light Walk with your family. The whole nursery is a wonderland. The last light event this month is Saturday December 21 from 4:30 to 6 p.m. You'll want to join in with the caroling starting at 5 p.m. The event is free and everyone is encouraged to bring a donation of non-perishable food for Helpline House.

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