



THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

Detoxing Your Holiday Greenery

As we hunker down inside for the shorter, colder days of winter, we often choose to bring nature in with us.

And so we might brave the wilds to bring home a lush Christmas tree, then deck it with ornaments and lights, to provide a spot to gather our gifts wrapped with care. Or perhaps we scatter poinsettia pots to bestow their Christmas red and green brightness wherever they might land.

Yet how often are we unknowingly bringing toxic pesticides in with our holiday cheer? After all, these plants are agricultural crops, and insecticides and herbicides are the norm in that domain.

I found this out the hard way many years ago, when a beau gave me a fabulous bouquet of flowers. Suddenly I started having debilitating headaches, and only found relief when I made the connection and banished the flowers to the deck, to be viewed only through a foggy window pane.

Since then, I've discovered that flowers and plants are allowed to have notably higher levels of toxics than food, because they aren't consumed. But do we really want these toxics sitting in our homes?

Choosing a Christmas tree

Each year, folks in the U.S. buy 25 to 30 million of this holiday staple. Tree farms can use various pesticides on and around their trees, including neurotoxic insecticides to kill aphids,

herbicides to control weeds, and fungicides to knock back fungus.

Many of these pesticides have been linked to cancer, hormone disruption, neurotoxicity, organ damage, reproductive/birth defects, asthma, and more, according to the nonprofit group Beyond Pesticides. These toxics potentially cause harm to workers and the environment. Plus they can include pesticides not allowed to be used inside our homes.

So how much of this is on the tree when we get it? We just don't know. According to Hannah Wallace in her 2014 article, "Seasons Greening," no studies have been done to see if Christmas trees still have pesticides on them at harvest.

But what if we simply want to skip the toxics with our Christmas tree, both at the farm and in our houses?

There are many options out there, so follow these key principles.

1) Buy organic. This is the best choice, because of organic's third-party certification. But the organic tree industry is just a sapling, with only 1% of U.S. holiday trees organic. Still, supporting this when possible encourages more to develop.

2) Buy "no pesticide." A second choice is to buy trees that a vendor says are grown without any toxic

pesticides. Note that, without certification, it's up to you to evaluate if they're being truthful. Ask them about both the trees they grow and any cut ones they bring in. Even local tree farms sometimes include pre-cut imported trees (from Oregon, most likely) among their wares.

3) Explore locally grown options. Look beyond Christmas tree lots to small local farms. That makes it easier for you to ask the grower about their practices. Plus they won't need to use pesticides for shipping or a large industrial operation.

A few local sources

In my research, I didn't find any local Christmas tree farms that promoted themselves as organic or using "no toxic pesticides." However, I am writing this in October, before the season starts. I did make some calls and found three leads, though I haven't visited them personally.

■ **Little Hills Christmas Tree Farms.** They don't use pesticides on their trees or land, and will help you by cutting and loading your tree. They do also have imported pre-cut trees; these are grown with unknown practices. Snacks, Santa, and land to stroll. (Petaluma, www.littlehillschristmastree.com, 707/763-4678)

■ **Celesta Farms.** No toxic pesticides are used on their trees, just an organic-acceptable oil for mites. They do use a conventional herbicide to prepare spots for new seedlings. They offer customers help with their trees — plus free cookies and cider. (Sebastopol (near Freestone), www.celestafarms.com, 707/829-9352)

■ **Santa's Trees.** They don't use any pesticides or fertilizers on their trees. This place is really self-serve. You find, cut, carry, and load your own tree. They offer views, picnic tables, and permission to roam. (Sebastopol (near Freestone), 707/823-6635)

More ways to avoid toxics

■ **Mail order.** For instance, Silvertip Tree Farm ships trees and greenery that they grow wild and without pesticides. Located in the Sierra Nevada mountains just south of Yosemite, they've planted a dense forest and just

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Greenery, continued

sell the trees they thin. (www.silvertiptreefarm.com, 559/877-4901)

■ **Decorate with other natural items.** You can bring in the smell and feeling of Christmas with other natural items from your land or a friend's, or from an eco-grower. For instance, you might welcome guests with a wreath, drape garlands to highlight your staircase, or adorn your mantle with pine boughs. Maybe it's time to trim that pine tree?

■ **Create a faux tree alternative.** For inspiration and ideas, see www.inhabitots.com/21-beautiful-faux-diy-christmas-trees-to-brighten-the-season.

Bonus tips!

■ **Consider a potted tree.** This lets you avoid the waste of a cut tree while enhancing your home's landscaping. Choose an appropriate variety for your needs and ecosystem. Keep it inside for just about ten days. Then move it outside and water it well until it's time to plant in the ground.

■ **Recycle your cut tree after the season.** Ask your garbage service about its curbside tree pickup.

■ **I don't recommend artificial Christmas trees.** Most are made with oil-based plastics such as PVC (polyvinyl chloride), and can contain lead. Nearly all have flame retardants, which are likely toxic. Some have warnings to avoid breathing their dust. (Some options claim to be less-toxic, but can still have some PVC. Learn more at www.thesoft-landing.com/how-to-find-a-non-toxic-artificial-christmas-tree.)

Also, according to one study, it takes 20 years to reach the eco-breakeven point for natural resource use and climate impacts with artificial trees compared to natural trees. But the average family discards their fake tree after only six to nine years. Then it goes to a landfill where it never biodegrades.

I personally think that live evergreens in our homes help us stay connected to nature's aliveness during our winter householding.

Finding Safer Flowers

Flowers often also find their way into our holidays — as party décor, hostess gifts, or mailed bouquets. But sadly these too can be doused with toxic pesticides during growing and shipping, and regulations are also less-protective than for food. Plus cut flowers are often imported from countries with poor environmental and worker protections.

So look for organic and "no pesticide" flower options at local farms, farmers' markets, and delivery services. Ask questions and read labels carefully to go beyond vague eco-claims. Do they actually say "no toxics allowed"? Do they have third-party certification?

Here are some local options:

■ **Dragonfly Farm.** This organic farm's onsite store offers holiday wreaths and centerpieces, fresh herbs, gifts crafted from the garden, wreath-making classes, and event décor. Their open house on December 3 features local artists with natural art. Visitors can walk and picnic in the garden. (Healdsburg, www.dragonflyhealdsburg.com, 707/433-3739)

■ **Full Bloom Flower Farm and Floral Design.** "Abundant, chemical-free flower fields." Owner/farmer Hedda Brorstrom will have her seasonal wreaths plus herbal products at Holiday on Florence!, December 3 and 4 (343 Florence Avenue). Plus she's offering wreath-making classes November 20 and December 10. Private orders by email fullbloomflowerfarm@gmail.com. (Sebastopol (near Graton), www.fullbloomgraton.com/?page_id=15, 707/591-6968)

■ **Oak Hill Farm.** This organic-practices farm offers seasonal wreaths and greenery, plus produce and dried flowers. (Glen Ellen, www.oakhillfarm.net, 707/996-6643)

■ **Whole Foods (Coddington).** This store is trying a certified organic line of flowers, and currently has a couple of fall-themed items. If these succeed, perhaps they'll carry more. (Santa Rosa, 707/542-7411)

■ **California Sister.** All flowers are from local growers who say they're using organic practices, though many

**Timely Tips**

■ **For more ideas for detoxing your holidays**, see the STEP Index at www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html. Also see my eco-holiday tips at www.healthyworld.org/ecoholidays.html.

■ **The next Sebastopol Toxics Collection Day is on Tuesday December 6**, from 4 to 8pm. To make an appointment, call 707/795-2025 or 877/747-1870 at least 24 hours before the event. You can also drop items at the Household Toxics Facility. For more about local toxics disposal, see www.recyclenow.org or call 707/565-3375.

aren't certified. Retail store, delivery, event services, and workshops. (Sebastopol, Barlow, www.californiasister.com, 707/827-8090)

I invite you to share with me any eco-tree or flower places you find. I'll post this article plus any additions at www.healthyworld.org/ecoholidays1.html.

SOURCES: "Seasons Greening," by Hannah Wallace, www.civileats.com/2014/12/11/seasons-greening-how-christmas-tree-farmers-are-cutting-down-on-pesticides • www.beyondpesticides.org/programs/center-for-community-pesticide-free-holidays/Christmas • www.organicauthority.com/is-your-christmas-tree-sprayed-with-pesticides • <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/nov/30/news/la-ol-green-christmas-trees-20121129> • www.sfgate.com/green/article/Chemicals-can-be-good-for-healthy-holiday-tree-3258805.php

ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. STEP is a project of the **City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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