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.celesta farms.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
Greenery, continued

sell the trees they thin. (www.silvertip

treefarm.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. May-

be 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 ecosys-
tem. 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 retard-

ants, which are likely toxic. Some

have warnings to avoid breathing

dust. (Some options claim to be

less-toxic, but can still have some

PVC. Learn more at

www.inhabitots.com/21-beautiful-faux-
diy-christmas-trees-to-brighten-the-
season.)

Also, according to one study, it

takes 20 years to reach the eco-

break-even point for natural re-

source use and climate impacts

with artificial trees compared to

natural trees. But the average fam-

ily 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 lo-
cal farms, farmers’ markets, and

delivery services. Ask ques-
tions 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 gar-

den, wreath-making classes, and

event décor. Their open house on

December 3 features local art-

ists with natural art. Visitors can

walk and picnic in the garden.

(Healdsburg, www.dragonlyhealds-
burg.com, 707/433-3739)

■ Full Bloom Flower Farm and

Floral Design. “Abundant, chemi-
cal-free flower fields.” Owner/farmer

Hedda Brorstrom will have her sea-
nonal 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 fullbloom

flowerfarm@gmail.com. (Sebastopol


com/?page_id=15, 707/591-6968)

■ Oak Hill Farm. This organi-

c-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

aren’t certified. Retail store, delivery,

event services, and workshops.

(Sebastopol, Barlow, www.california

sister.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/ecohealthyls.html.

SOURCES: “Seasons Greening,” by Hannah

seasons-greening-how-christmas-
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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/ecohealthys.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.

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