

For release mid-December

SIMPLY TREES monthly column

Nebraska Forest Service

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I Am a Christmas Tree

SIMPLY TREES for December 2015 by John Erixson, Nebraska Forest Service

The winter of 2011 was a hard winter, everyone told me, enough snow on the ground to reach the bottom limbs of the 120 foot tall Douglas-fir trees around me. Temperatures near zero most of December and January. Winds were blowing out of the west, coming up the St. Joe River Valley, "it seemed like spring would never come" is what the old-timers said.

I sprouted the following April in a place called Spring Creek, Idaho. Spring Creek is a pretty place, mountains on three sides, a crystal clear stream in the bottom of the valley. The mountain peaks in the spring are covered with snow, framed nicely by the rays of the early spring sun. The temperatures began to rise and the spring rains came forth to bring new life to the woods as the grass greened up and the wildflowers began to bloom. Spring Creek is a great place to grow up for a young Christmas tree.

The summer of my first year was warm, in the 50s at night and 80s during the day, with plenty of rain to keep the soil moist. This allowed me to establish my roots in the rich dark loess soils found in Spring Creek and grow more than a foot and a half my first year. I had many friends near me but none too close, so I was able to spread my branches and enjoy the sunlight.

In October winter returned with 2 inches of fresh snow and colder temperatures. Preparing for the long winter ahead, I go dormant, looking forward to the spring ahead. In March the snow began to melt, allowing my leader to poke through the snow for the first time in five months. I am told it was a cold winter by the old-timers, but I was comfortable, insulated from the cold and wind by the many feet of snow above me.

The sun warms the soil and provides me with energy. As the days grow longer, it is time to open my buds and grow taller. The summer is a little drier than last year, so I only grow another foot. My whorls are a little closer together than most Douglas-fir trees found in the area, but I am okay with that, for I am a Christmas tree.

As the days grew shorter, the winter returned with the first snow in September. Having stored many carbohydrates in my roots, I am ready for the winter ahead as I go dormant. The winter was not as cold and there was less snow, so in February my leader begins to show above the snow. Though the sun was warm, the wind and rains remained cold in the spring of that year. I was slow to want to break bud due to the freezing temperatures at night.

It is June before the temperatures are warm enough for me to start growing. The summer is hot and dry, so I don't grow a lot. I can see smoke from a wildfire in the next drainage over and hope it does not come this way. Fortunately, it began to rain in early September as winter approached. I am almost 4 feet tall as the snow returns.

As spring returns again in April, my buds break and enjoy the warm sun. I enjoy the ample nutrients and water found in the soil near my roots. I photosynthesize to grow taller and maintain the dark green color of my needles. In July, a man comes along and trims my boughs to keep me nice and neat.

As winter arrives, I again go dormant, knowing this will be an important winter for me.

In November, I get on a truck in St. Maries, Idaho, bound for Lincoln, Neb. I arrive on the lot with many of my friends, knowing we will soon be in warm homes, helping people celebrate the holidays. This is where you find me. Standing before you at 6 feet tall, you select me for my deep green color, firm branches and beautiful shape. I get to come home with you. You decorate me with many multi-colored lights, colorful glass ornaments and silver tinsel. You turn off the overhead lights and plug in my colored lights and admire the sight as I stand proudly in your home, for I am a Christmas tree.