

LIVING

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GEORGE WEIGEL, PennLive
The Fraser fir is quickly becoming a favorite species of Christmas tree for its sleek form and strong branches with soft, short needles.

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Your guide to picking perfect tree

Today's arrival of Thanksgiving opens the floodgates to what will be a compact, less-than-four-week shopping season for Christmas trees.

Live trees seem to be on the upswing. Consumers bought an estimated 33 million live conifers during the 2013 holiday season, up from the 24.5 million sold in 2012, according to the National Christmas Tree Association.

According to a Harris Interactive poll, consumers paid an average of \$35.30 per live tree in 2013, down from the \$41.30 average reported in 2012.

Prices look to be steady this year, and the local supply should be plentiful thanks to an excellent growing season, said Rick Bates, a Penn State University horticulture professor who specializes in the Christmas tree market.

If past habits are any indication, about 85 percent of this year's live trees will be bought pre-cut at retail lots, garden centers, chain stores, directly from tree farms and, increasingly, online.

The remaining live trees are bought at cut-your-own Christmas tree farms.

Cutting your own keeps it fresher

Cutting your own is the best way to ensure a live tree is fresh and will hold its needles through the holidays.

That's somewhat of an extra concern this year because fall stayed so warm for so long.

Cut trees stay fresh longest when the ground is consistently damp and when the cold

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SARA BOZICH



Read Sara's weekly out-and-about column, "Out with Sara," at PennLive.com.

Elf ON THE Shelf

BY AISHA SULTAN | ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH



The Elf is on the loose. • As early as tonight and up until the night before Christmas, a mischievous elf keeps a watchful eye on children's behavior to report to the jolly ol' guy with The List. • It's a fairly recent holiday tradition launched by an author who wrote a children's book about her family's tradition.

After the family goes to bed each night, the elf flies back to the North Pole to make a daily report to Santa. He's found in a new spot each morning and can't be touched for fear of losing his magic.

Some say the elf is creepy with his ever-present gaze, while others are delighted by his antics. Every day, the scene of the elven crime changes.

It's easy to go Pinterest-overboard with this modern-day holiday tradition. But kept in its proper perspective, the Elf on the Shelf — or the new Mensch on a Bench for Jewish families — can be a way to bring back that holiday spark.

Alison Hoette, 38, of Clayton, Mo., noticed one year that the eldest of her three children, Charlie, 8, had started questioning the whole Santa process.

"We weren't ready to give it up yet," she said.

Enter Nick the Elf. He arrived on their front porch

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SURVIVAL TIPS FOR ELF ON THE SHELF

- » Start planning, and start now. There are 28 days until Christmas. When 10 p.m. rolls around, you're not going to want to search the Internet for ideas.
- » Start later. Your elf could be too busy making toys to appear before mid-December.
- » Make a list of things you might need to buy, collect or make.
- » Incorporate your kids' toys as props.
- » Put wire in your elf's arms and legs. It makes him easier to pose.
- » Keep the elf out of high-traffic areas.
- » Put him up high. Kids will be less likely to touch him.
- » Have a plan for when your kids accidentally touch the elf. You could have them close their eyes and spin around three times to "put him back where he belongs."
- » Don't panic if you forget to move it. Sometimes elves like a day off, too.
- » Don't feel the need to compete. Limit big ideas to once or twice a week.
- » Last of all, have fun! Your kids will have a blast figuring out what the mischievous little guy got into. And they only believe in Santa for so long.

Don't let your family have a Thanksgiving dining disaster

If you are having a critical moment in the kitchen on the day of the feast or in preparation for Christmas and need immediate answers to avoid a soggy pie crust or salvage a burnt turkey, don't despair. In addition to live chats on websites, YouTube videos and Facebook pages, here are some of the top lifelines:

» **Perdue consumer help line:** 800-473-7383; perdue.com. 7 a.m.-3 p.m. today and 9:30 a.m.-6 p.m. weekdays year-round (except Friday and Christmas Day).

» **Butterball Turkey Talk-Line:** 800-BUTTERBALL (288-8372); butterball.com. More than 50 turkey experts answer turkey-related questions from cooks around the United

States and Canada from 7 a.m.-7 p.m. today; 9 a.m.-7 p.m. weekdays from Friday to Dec. 23; 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Dec. 20-21; 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Christmas Eve; closed on Christmas.

» **Sara Lee Pie Hotline:** 888-914-1247; saraleedesserts.com. 8 a.m.-2 p.m. today or 7 a.m.-6 p.m. weekdays to answer questions on crusts and fillings.

» **U.S. Department of Agriculture Meat and Poultry Hotline:** 888-674-6854; fsis.usda.gov. Food-safety specialists answer calls about meat and poultry preparation and cooking questions in English and in Spanish 8 a.m.-2 p.m. today and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays year-round. Email questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov. Recorded information is available 24 hours a day. Live chat also is available during hotline hours.



Prevent a kitchen catastrophe or get answers to questions with some of the top Thanksgiving hotlines.

» **Ask Karen:** A searchable database of common food-safety questions is available 24 hours a day, seven

days a week at AskKaren.gov. Live chats are available 10 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays. Also available in Spanish.

On mobile devices, m.askkaren.gov.

» **Foster Farms Turkey Helpline:** 800-255-7227; fosterfarms.com. Information given by operators 24 hours a day through Saturday. The help line is available 11 a.m.-8 p.m. weekdays after Saturday. After-hours automated service is available.

» **Ocean Spray Holiday Helpline:** 800-662-3263; oceanspray.com. The helpline will be open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. today. All you need to know about cranberries — fresh or canned.

» **Shady Brook Farms Turkey Line:** 888-723-4468; shadybrookfarms.com. Prerecorded information about how to select, prepare and cook a turkey is available 24 hours a day.

» **Fleischmann's Yeast Baker Hotline:** 800-777-4959; Breadworld.com. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays.

Prerecorded tips for baking.

» **Honeysuckle White:** 800-810-6325; honeysucklewhite.com. Prerecorded answers to turkey prep questions. Website includes recipes for leftovers.

» **National Turkey Federation:** eatturkey.com; 900-plus recipes.

» **King Arthur Flour:** kingarthurfour.com/bakers-hotline. Baking tips, including secrets of perfect pie crusts.

» **Nestle Toll House Baking Information Line:** 800-637-8537; verybestbaking.com. Prerecorded answers to baking questions available today. Tips, recipes and a holiday magazine also are available online.

» **Hershey's Consumer Hotline:** 800-468-1714; www.hersheys.com. Press 1 for recipes and tips.