

Decorating your Christmas tree

By Maria Fox

Oh the Christmas tree. Of all the holiday traditions, no other unites the family and embodies the season in such a special way, whether elegantly adorned or decorated with the kids' handmade ornaments. And, while it may not be the "reason for the season," the Christmas tree is a symbol of it — taking center stage in the annual celebrations that we cherish. Oh Christmas tree, how lovely are thee.

While there are no rules for creating your holiday masterpiece, there are tips for achieving optimum effect no matter what the theme or style you're working with.

It starts with the tree. A few key choices: fresh or artificial, green or flocked, slender or wide, tall or short. In the classic sense, it is hard to improve on the natural beauty of a fresh Christmas tree. However, artificial trees are gaining popularity. Many people prefer the convenience of an artificial tree, especially those with allergies or space is-

sues. Considering the reasonable expected "life" of an artificial tree is three to five years, they are often the economical choice as well. Also, your artificial tree can be on display indefinitely versus the 10 to 20 days of the fresh cut tree.

When choosing an artificial tree, there are a few things to remember: quality and warranty. A quality tree will look realistic with varied foliage styles and sizes. Look for many tips on the branches for a fuller tree and notice how well the tips are secured to the branches. Three years is the norm for warranties, yet there are manufacturers that offer longer ones. Pre-lit trees are great. Not only does this spare you the tedious task of putting the lights on the tree (an art form in itself when done properly), but they are lit in sections making set-up, breakdown and storage easy.

Big tip: Store your tree in its original box! Many warranties require it for good reason. The box is designed to properly protect not only the tree's frame and branches, but the

lights as well. The glass bulbs can be easily dislodged or broken. Technology continues to improve the life of the light strings. But the better you care for your tree, the longer it will reward you with performance — often, well past the warranty.

Lights are the foundation for a well-decorated tree. One hundred lights per foot of tree height is the average, but the more the better. Adding shaped or colored specialty lights, like those that reflect a theme, will create a great effect.

Next, tuck in a decorating fabric, like LeSheer, in the center of the tree. This will create the illusion of fullness, with less ornaments.

A well-decorated tree has several shapes and sizes of ornamentation incorporated together. One distinction between a casual and formal tree is in the ornament mix. Formal trees have layers of the same ornaments in quantities dispersed evenly over the tree. This uniformity creates more elegance and formality. The charm of many casual trees is in the lack of uniformity; often they are filled with numerous handmade family mementos.

No matter the style, Christmas tree deco-

rating is a lesson in both restraint and excess simultaneously. Too many ornaments are as unsettling as too few. Organize your ornaments into groups by style and size and put them on the tree in a methodical fashion. Put the largest in first and deepest into the tree, followed in size to the smallest. Everything does not need to hang; don't forget to use the tops of branches, often a good place to highlight special shapes, like birds, floral sprays or bows.

Finding the right tree topper and tree skirt can stump even the seasoned decorator. Remember, you don't need a traditional top or skirt here. For the topper use elements of the tree in an exaggerated, more concentrated way like floral sprays or something from your theme like a cowboy hat. A few yards of coordinating fabric is the perfect finish that can set your tree off while saving you the cost of a traditional tree skirt.

Information courtesy of Wight's Home & Garden, 5026 196th St. S.W., Lynnwood. Contact them at (425) 775-3636 or visit www.wights.com.