



Home / Topics / Christmas / [History of Christmas Trees](#)

# History of Christmas Trees

**BY: HISTORY.COM EDITORS**

**PUBLISHED: NOVEMBER 28, 2023**

## Table of Contents

[1. How Did Christmas Trees Start?](#)

[2. Christmas Trees From Germany](#)

[3. Who Brought Christmas Trees to America?](#)

[4. Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree](#)

[5. Christmas Trees Around the World](#)

[6. Christmas Tree Trivia and Facts](#)

The history of Christmas trees has many roots, ranging from the use of evergreens in ancient Egypt and Rome to the

German traditions of candlelit trees that made its way to America in the 1800s. Discover the history of the Christmas tree, from the earliest winter solstice celebrations to Queen Victoria's decorating habits and the annual lighting of the Rockefeller Center tree in New York City.

## How Did Christmas Trees Start?

Long before the advent of [Christianity](#), plants and trees that remained green all year had a special meaning for people in the winter. Just as people today decorate their homes during the festive season with pine, spruce, and fir trees, many ancient peoples hung evergreen boughs over their doors and windows. In many countries it was believed that evergreens would keep away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illness.

In the Northern hemisphere, the shortest day and longest night of the year falls on December 21 or December 22 and is called the [winter solstice](#). Many ancient people believed that the sun was a god and that winter came every year because the sun god had become sick and weak. They celebrated the solstice because it meant that at last the sun god would begin to get well. Evergreen boughs reminded them of all the green plants that would grow again when the sun god was strong and summer would return.

The [ancient Egyptians](#) worshipped a god called Ra, who had the head of a hawk and wore the sun as a blazing disk in his crown. At the solstice, when Ra began to recover from his illness, the Egyptians filled their homes with green palms and papyrus reeds, which symbolized for them the triumph of life over death.

*Did you know? Christmas trees are grown in all 50 states including Hawaii and Alaska.*

Early [Romans](#) marked the solstice with a feast called [Saturnalia](#) in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. The Romans knew that the solstice meant that soon, farms and orchards would be green and fruitful. To mark the occasion, they decorated their homes and temples with evergreen boughs.

In Northern Europe the Druids, the priests of the ancient [Celts](#), also decorated their temples with evergreen boughs as a symbol of everlasting life. The [Vikings](#) in Scandinavia honored the evergreen mistletoe for its role in the death of the Balder, a god of light.

## Christmas Trees From Germany

Germany is credited with starting the Christmas tree tradition—as we now know it—by the 16th century when sources record devout Christians bringing decorated trees into their homes. Some built Christmas pyramids of wood and decorated them with evergreens and candles if wood was scarce.

It is a widely held belief that [Martin Luther](#), the 16th-century Protestant reformer, first added lighted candles to a tree. According to a common version of the story, walking home one winter evening, Luther was awed by the stars twinkling amidst evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he erected a tree in the main room and wired its branches with lighted candles.

## Who Brought Christmas Trees to America?

Most 19th-century Americans found Christmas trees an oddity. The first records of Christmas trees being cut for display comes from the 1820s in Pennsylvania's German community, although trees may have been a tradition there even earlier. As early as 1747, Moravian Germans in Pennsylvania had a community tree in the form of a wooden pyramid decorated with candles. But, as late as the 1840s, Christmas trees were seen as pagan symbols and not accepted by most Americans.

It is not surprising that, like many other festive Christmas customs, the tree was adopted so late in America. New England's first Puritan leaders viewed Christmas celebrations as unholy. The pilgrims's second governor, [William Bradford](#), wrote that he tried hard to stamp out "pagan mockery" of the observance, penalizing any frivolity.

In 1659, the General Court of [Massachusetts](#) enacted a law making any observance of December 25 a penal offense; people were fined for hanging decorations. That stern solemnity continued until the influx of German and Irish immigrants in the 19th century undermined the Puritan legacy.

In 1846, the popular royals, [Queen Victoria](#) and her German Prince, Albert, were sketched in the *Illustrated London News* standing with their children around a Christmas tree. Unlike the previous royal family, Victoria was very popular with her subjects, and what was done at court immediately became fashionable—not only in Britain, but with fashion-conscious East Coast American Society. The Christmas tree had arrived.

By the 1890s Christmas ornaments were arriving from Germany and Christmas tree popularity was on the rise around the U.S. It was noted that Europeans used small trees about four feet in height, while Americans liked their Christmas trees to extend from floor to ceiling.

The early 20th century saw Americans decorating their trees mainly with homemade ornaments, while many German Americans continued to use apples, nuts and marzipan cookies. Stringed popcorn was added to trees' decoration after being dyed bright colors and interlaced with berries and nuts. Electricity brought about Christmas lights, making it possible for Christmas trees to glow for days on end. With this, Christmas trees began to appear in town squares across the country and having a Christmas tree in the home became an American tradition.

## Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree

The Rockefeller Center tree is located at Rockefeller Center, west of Fifth Avenue from 47th through 51st Streets in [New York City](#).

The Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree dates back to the [Depression](#) era, with the first tree placed in 1931. It was a small unadorned tree set up by construction workers at the center of the construction site. Two years later, another tree was placed there, this time with lights.

These days, the giant Rockefeller Center tree is laden with over 50,000 Christmas lights. The tallest tree displayed at Rockefeller Center arrived in 1999. It was a Norway Spruce that measured 100 feet tall and hailed from Killingworth, [Connecticut](#).

## Christmas Trees Around the World

### Christmas Trees in Canada

German settlers began migrating to Canada from the United States in the 1700s. They brought Canada's first Christmas trees and, in later generations, gingerbread houses and Advent calendars. When Queen Victoria's German husband, Prince Albert, put up a Christmas tree at

Windsor Castle in 1848, Christmas trees became a widely popular tradition throughout England, the United States and Canada.

### **Christmas Trees in Mexico**

In most Mexican homes the principal holiday adornment is *el Nacimiento* (Nativity scene). However, a decorated Christmas tree may be incorporated in the Nacimiento or set up elsewhere in the home. As purchase of a natural pine represents a luxury commodity to most Mexican families, the typical *arbolito* (little tree) is often an artificial one, a bare branch cut from a copal tree (*Bursera microphylla*) or some type of shrub collected from the countryside.

### **Christmas Trees in Great Britain**

The Norway spruce is the traditional species used to decorate homes in Britain. The Norway spruce was a native species in the British Isles before the last [Ice Age](#), and was reintroduced here before the 1500s.

### **Christmas Trees in Greenland**

Since icy Greenland lacks large native forests, most Christmas trees are imported. They are decorated with candles and bright ornaments.

### **Christmas Trees in Guatemala**

The Christmas tree has joined the Nacimiento as a popular ornament because of the large German population in Guatemala.

### **Christmas Trees in Brazil**

Although Christmas falls during the summer in most of Brazil, sometimes pine trees are decorated with little pieces of cotton that represent falling snow.

### **Christmas Trees in Ireland**

Christmas trees are bought anytime in December and decorated with colored lights, tinsel, and baubles. Some people favor the angel on top of

the tree, others the star. The house is decorated with garlands, candles, holly, and ivy. Wreaths and mistletoe are hung on the door.

### **Christmas Trees in Sweden**

Most people buy Christmas trees well before Christmas Eve, but it's not common to take the tree inside and decorate it until just a few days before. Evergreen trees are decorated with stars, sunbursts and snowflakes made from straw. Other decorations include colorful wooden animals and straw centerpieces.

### **Christmas Trees in Norway**

Norwegians often take a trip to the woods to select a Christmas tree, a trip that their grandfathers probably did not make. The Christmas tree was not introduced into Norway from Germany until the latter half of the 19th century; to the country districts it came even later. Many families decorate their trees on 'Little Christmas Eve'—December 23. A Norwegian ritual known as "circling the Christmas tree" follows, where everyone joins hands to form a ring around the tree and then walks around it singing carols.

### **Christmas Trees in Ukraine**

Celebrated on December 25th by Catholics and on January 7th by Orthodox Christians, Christmas is the most popular holiday in the Ukraine. During the Christmas season, which also includes New Year's Day, people decorate fir trees and have parties.

### **Christmas Trees in Spain**

A popular Christmas custom in Catalonia is the *Caga Tió*, a decorated log that children "feed" scraps of food during the days before Christmas. On Christmas, the log is covered with a blanket and the children hit it with a stick. Then the blanket is removed to reveal the treats like toffee and hazelnuts that Caga Tió has "defecated."

## Christmas Trees in Italy

In one Italian tradition, the *presepio* (manger or crib) represents in miniature the Holy Family in the stable and is the center of Christmas for families. Guests kneel before it and musicians sing before it. The *presepio* figures are usually hand-carved and very detailed in features and dress. The scene is often set out in the shape of a triangle. It provides the base of a pyramid-like structure called the *ceppo*. This is a wooden frame arranged to make a pyramid several feet high. Several tiers of thin shelves are supported by this frame. It is entirely decorated with colored paper, gilt pine cones, and miniature colored pennants. Small candles are fastened to the tapering sides. A star or small doll is hung at the apex of the triangular sides. The shelves above the manger scene have small gifts of fruit, candy, and presents. The *ceppo* is likely related to older 'tree of light' traditions linked to Christmas trees in other countries. Some houses even have a *ceppo* for each child in the family.

## Christmas Trees in Germany

Many Christmas traditions practiced around the world today started in Germany.

As mentioned above, some Lutheran traditions credit Martin Luther with placing the first lighted candles on a Christmas tree.

Another legend says that in the early 16th century, people in Germany combined two customs that had been practiced in different countries around the globe. The Paradise tree (a fir tree decorated with apples) represented the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. The Christmas Light, a small, pyramid-like frame, usually decorated with glass balls, tinsel and a candle on top, was a symbol of the birth of Christ as the Light of the World. Changing the tree's apples to tinsel balls and cookies and combining this new tree with the light placed on top, the Germans created the tree that many of us know today.



The modern Tannenbaum (Christmas trees) is traditionally decorated in secret with lights, tinsel and ornaments by parents and then lit and revealed on Christmas Eve with cookies, nuts and gifts under its branches.

### **Christmas Trees in South Africa**

Christmas is a summer holiday in South Africa. Although Christmas trees are not common, windows are often draped with sparkling cotton wool and tinsel.

### **Christmas Trees in Saudi Arabia**

Christian Americans, Europeans, Indians, Filipinos, and others living in Saudi Arabia have to celebrate Christmas privately in their homes. Christmas lights are generally not tolerated. Most families place their Christmas trees somewhere inconspicuous.

### **Christmas Trees in Philippines**

Fresh pine trees are too expensive for many Filipinos, so handmade trees in an array of colors and sizes are often used. Star lanterns, or *parol*, appear everywhere in December. They are made from bamboo sticks, covered with brightly colored rice paper or cellophane, and usually feature a tassel on each point. There is usually one in every window, each representing the Star of Bethlehem.

### **Christmas Trees in China**

More than 80 percent of the world's artificial Christmas trees are made in China, but a much smaller portion of Chinese people celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday. Those who do often put up artificial trees—"trees of light" decorated with paper chains and lanterns.

### **Christmas Trees in Japan**

For most of the Japanese who celebrate Christmas, it's purely a secular holiday devoted to the love of their children. Christmas trees are

decorated with small toys, dolls, paper ornaments, gold paper fans and lanterns, and wind chimes. Miniature candles are also put among the tree branches. One of the most popular ornaments is the origami crane. Japanese children have exchanged thousands of folded paper “birds of peace” with young people all over the world as a pledge that war must not happen again.

## Christmas Tree Trivia and Facts

Christmas trees have been sold commercially in the United States since about 1850.

In 1979, the National Christmas Tree was not lighted except for the top ornament. This was done in honor of the American hostages in Iran.

Between 1887-1933 a fishing schooner called the Christmas Ship would tie up at the Clark Street bridge and sell spruce and pine trees from [Michigan](#) to Chicagoans.

The much-disputed title for the tallest living Christmas tree likely goes to an allegedly 160-foot Sitka Spruce in Ferndale, California.

Franklin Pierce, the 14th president, is often credited with bringing the Christmas tree tradition to the White House in the early 1850s.

In 1923, President [Calvin Coolidge](#) started the [National Christmas Tree Lighting](#) Ceremony now held every year on the White House lawn.

Since 1966, the National Christmas Tree Association has given a Christmas tree to the President and first family.

Most Christmas trees are cut weeks before they get to a retail outlet.

In 1912, what were likely the first major community Christmas trees in the United States were erected in Boston, New York City and Hartford, Conn.

Christmas trees generally take six to eight years to mature.

Christmas trees are grown in all 50 states including [Hawaii](#) and [Alaska](#).

Ninety-eight percent of all natural Christmas trees are grown on farms.

More than 1,000,000 acres of land have been planted with Christmas trees.

On average, as many as 1,500 Christmas trees are planted per acre.

You should never burn your Christmas tree in the fireplace. It can contribute to creosote buildup.

Other types of trees such as cherry and hawthorns were used as Christmas trees in the past.

[Thomas Edison](#)'s assistants came up with the idea of electric lights for Christmas trees.

In 1963, the National Christmas Tree was not lit until December 22nd because of a national 30-day period of mourning following the [assassination of President John F. Kennedy](#).

[Teddy Roosevelt](#) banned the Christmas tree from the White House, possibly for environmental reasons—but his young son snuck a tree into the house anyway.

In the first week, a tree in your home will consume as much as three quarts of water per day.

Tinsel used to be made with lead foil, but in the early 1970s the U.S. Food and Drug Administration convinced manufacturers to switch to plastic tinsel.

The best-selling Christmas trees include the Scotch Pine, Douglas Fir, Fraser Fir, Balsam Fir and Blue Spruce.

**BY: [HISTORY.COM EDITORS](#)**

[HISTORY.com](#) works with a wide range of writers and editors to create accurate and informative content. All articles are regularly reviewed and updated by the HISTORY.com team. Articles with the “HISTORY.com Editors” byline have been written or edited by the HISTORY.com editors, including [Amanda Onion](#), [Missy Sullivan](#), [Matt Mullen](#) and Christian Zapata.

---

---

## Citation Information

**Article Title** History of Christmas Trees

**Author** [History.com Editors](#)

**Website Name** HISTORY

**URL** <https://www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas-trees>

**Date Accessed** November 23, 2024

**Publisher** A&E Television Networks

**Last Updated** November 28, 2023

**Original Published Date** November 28, 2023

---

## Fact Check

We strive for accuracy and fairness. But if you see something that doesn't look right, [click here](#) to contact us! HISTORY reviews and updates its content regularly to ensure it is complete and accurate.

---



[Contact Us](#) | [Copyright Policy](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Ad Choices](#) |

[Accessibility Support](#)

© 2024, A&E Television Networks, LLC. All Rights Reserved.