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Christmas is Over and You've Got a Dying Tree. Now What?

After celebrating Christmas and seeing the pine needles begin to fall, many people are stuck with a dying tree. What do you do with a slowly dying pine, fir or spruce? After the holidays, many municipalities allow old Christmas trees to be placed curbside. Trees are then collected and ground up for mulch or burned. If you miss the designated date, or your trash collector doesn't accept trees, there are several options to prolong the useful life of the tree.

An old Christmas tree can be used to benefit birds, fish, and the landscape by placing it in a corner of your deck, and spreading some birdseed nearby, or tying it to a deciduous tree or post near a bird feeder. The birds benefit from having escape cover nearby when hawks or cats threaten, and the dense boughs reduce the effects of wind chill on a cold night.

Sinking your Christmas tree in a pond is an easy way to improve fish habitat and fishing. The tree serves as little coral reef, in that the branches provide substrate for water plants to grow, and cover for minnows and other forms of small aquatic life. Larger fish are drawn by the shade and the presence of prey. How do you sink a tree? Tie the base to a cinder block with a short, stout rope, and toss it in. Just be sure to get permission from the pond owner first.

Using the little tree around the landscape requires clipping off all of the branches. Use the boughs to add extra insulation around semi-hardy perennials or to trees and shrubs that were recently planted. The leftover trunk may be used as a garden stake next spring. Or cut and let it dry for a few weeks, and you will have some easy lighting firewood. Just beware that most conifer species tend to spark and pop more than hardwoods, as resin pockets in the wood make tiny explosions. This can delight the youngsters, but for safety's sake, keep an eye on the fire when burning Christmas tree logs. Just like ash firewood, pine firewood should not be transported from where it is cut. The pine sawyer beetle can spread pine wilt to susceptible pine populations through transportation in pine firewood.

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