



## **Ever Green**

A day before Thanksgiving, I collected colorful leaves, berries, and seed pods to set off the chrysanthemums on my table, all in shades of orange, gold, and brown. But just one day after Thanksgiving, I counted car after car with a trussed-up tree on its roof, and then went out to cut branches of white pine, cedar and spruce for my wreath. Just like that, the autumn harvest is left behind as we look forward to the winter holidays.

In just a few days, the Garden Club will deck the halls, streets, doors and gathering places around town. At the Community House, tarps will be spread on the floor and heaped with greens of every variety, plus prized red-berry-bearing branches, cut from members' yards, scavenged from the brush piles at the transfer station, and occasionally purloined from locations better left unnamed. The town street signs, alone, will require fourteen painstakingly constructed garlands. My lavishly berried pyracantha has been claimed for library decorations, but we'll have to hustle to harvest it ahead of the birds. I remember watching last year, hours before the first big winter storm, as mobs of birds stripped the branches bare in an afternoon. I saw more food fights just yesterday as dozens of birds jostled for the small blue berries on a cedar outside my kitchen window. It was a good year for the cedars, and the branches were heavy with fruit, but I still felt a bit guilty that I had clipped some of the birds' dinner for my decorations.

When did evergreens become synonymous with the holidays? Since forever, apparently. In a world in which planetary movements were poorly understood, people braved the winter solstice—longest night of the year, in the season of cold and death—with greenery that brightened dark halls and reassured them that, soon, spring would come again. It didn't take much to link the pagan reverence for evergreens to the Christian promise of eternal life.

Early Romans, Celtic Druids, and Scandinavian mythmakers all associated mistletoe, which can bloom in the coldest weather, with love and fertility. The Romans even thought it was an antidote to poison, which is odd, since mistletoe itself is quite toxic. Perhaps not the most appropriate choice for a kissing ball.

While decorating with greens was common across Europe, the Christmas tree is believed to have originated in Germany. According to tradition, it was Martin Luther, inspired by the beauty of stars seen through tree branches, who first put candles on a tree. One would think that what was good enough for the great Protestant reformer would have been good enough for our Puritan ancestors, but they viewed holiday decorations as a frivolous and heathen practice, and forbade anything other than a solemn religious observance of December 25. We owe the eventual acceptance of the custom to two factors: First, waves of German immigrants in the nineteenth century brought their traditions with them; their neighbors noticed and joined in. At the same time, Queen Victoria's German husband, Prince Albert, brought Christmas trees to the royal household, and fashionable people followed suit, in England and America.

By the turn of the century, trees were everywhere, in family homes and public spaces. Once electric lights became available, communities began lighting up trees in public spaces to mark the holidays. In 1948 the tallest tree ever to grace Rockefeller Center, a hundred-foot-tall Norway spruce, made its way to New York City from right next door, in Killingworth.

Today, Christmas trees are big business. There are an estimated 15,000 tree farms in the U.S., covering 350,000 acres and employing 100,000 people. From seedling to ceiling-scratcher size averages seven years. Even if you think it's wasteful to cut down a tree for the sake of a few weeks' enjoyment, please don't substitute an artificial tree: environmental groups say the ecological damage from a manufactured plastic tree far exceeds the impact of cutting a farmed tree—although, if at all possible, buy from a local grower to minimize shipping. Your tree can have a second life outdoors, decorated with seed and suet for wildlife, or cut off the branches to use as protection for garden beds. Even better, of course, is to buy a live tree.

Keep the house cool and the tree well watered, don't keep it indoors more than a week or so, and have the planting hole pre-dug and ready, in case the ground freezes.

My own tree probably won't be perfectly symmetrical. I'll find one in my woods, growing in an inconvenient spot too close to its brothers, or rooted in ledge, and small enough to cut with my hand saw while lying awkwardly on the ground. It will probably suggest Charlie Brown more than Rockefeller Center, but it will bring the smell of piney woods inside, and make a festive mess when the cats pull it down.

So fill your house with boughs of holly, hang wreathes of pine, spruce, and fir on your front door, and celebrate the certainty that, in only a few weeks, the days will once again start to lengthen toward spring.