OLD CHRISTMAS TREE CAN STILL DO GOOD OR at least no harm with recycling

Jim Smith, who operates Jim Smith's Christmas Tree Corner on Haywood Road, talks about what to do with your Christmas tree after the holiday. HEIDI HEILBRUNN/

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The end.

It's a tradition often overlooked within the string of customs observed around the holiday season — the torn wrapping paper, the darkened incandescent lights and the Christmas tree that almost as quickly as it became the heart of the home is cast aside.

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Go to GreenvilleOnline.com to see longtime Christmas tree lot owner Jim Smith talk about the end life of the holiday tree.

You could have the aunt who undressed the Christmas tree within hours of the final present being opened, or the liturgically mindful father, who insists the tree remain in all its fading glory through the 12th day of Christmas.

Maybe you just wait until New Year's Day, simply because you don't feel like messing with the ... mess ... until then.

What you do with your tree, whether live or artificial, is a small affair in the environmental sense of things. The ice caps won't melt tomorrow if your tree is dumped unceremoniously in the woods.

TREES

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However, just as with any act of holiday symbolism, doing something useful feels better than not, right?

And it doesn't take much to do *something*.

Tree options

For city dwellers, the path to disposing of your once-living Christmas tree in an environmentally friendly fashion is to simply drag it to the curb.

Municipalities throughout Greenville County participate in the "Grinding of the Greens" recycling program.

The program, several years in the running, is a collaborative effort across the county to recycle live trees into mulch instead of burying them in crowded landfills.

All they ask is that trees be stripped of debris such as ornaments, tinsel, ribbons and lights.

The trees are ground into mulch at the Twin Chimneys landfill on U.S. 25 in southern Greenville County between Fountain Inn and Belton. Residents can then pick up free loads of mulch from the landfill, said Marcia Pappin, the county's solid waste manager.

In the city of Greenville, trees placed at the curb will be picked up on regularly scheduled collection days "for as long as needed," said Allison Brockman, the city's recycling coordinator. The same is true for residents within the limits of Simpsonville, Mauldin, Fountain Inn and Travelers Rest, who can also take their trees to various drop-off locations.

In Greenville, trees also can be taken to four collections sites for recycling through Jan. 10: Holmes Park, Timmons Park, Gower Park and the West Greenville Community Center.

Outside the cities, the county encourages residents to take their trees to the landfill or any of its six convenience centers: Echo Valley north of Travelers Rest, Blackberry Valley west of Greenville, Piedmont center near Pelzer, Oneal center north of Greer, Enoree center east of Five Forks and the Simpsonville center on Hipps Road near Fountain Inn.

The trees aren't ground at the convenience centers but instead are transported to Twin Chimneys.

At one time, the county tried mulching Christmas trees exclusively, Pappin said. However, the result was a substandard mix of branches and needles, she said, so the trees now are ground along with other yard debris to create a suitable mix.

Going green

So the Christmas tree has become a faithful friend, bearing ornaments and memories, only to be cast aside.

Don't feel guilty.

"People today are really concentrating on green products, whether it be Christmas trees, construction materials, paper, whatever," said Jim Smith, who for 32 years has sold North Carolina-bred Fraser firs on his Haywood Road tree lot.

"A Christmas tree is a green, renewable resource. If there's a thousand trees cut off of an acre, they'll come back and put more trees back in two years."

You might even say they create "green jobs."

What you do with your tree is of relatively minimal consequence in the grand scheme of environmental protection.

In 2010, the American Christmas Tree Association — an organization that defends the environmental impact of artificial, plastic trees — commissioned a study that found that the use of Christmas trees accounts for "less than 0.1 percent of a person's annual carbon footprint and therefore is negligible within the context of the average American's lifestyle."

The impact lies more in how far you drive to get your tree, and whether you decide to keep an artificial tree over the course of several years instead of throwing it away in favor of whatever the retail store is promoting new next year.

"Consumers who wish to celebrate the holidays with a Christmas tree should do so knowing that the overall environmental impacts of both natural and artificial trees are extremely small when compared to other daily activities such as driving a car," the study said.

"Neither natural nor artificial Christmas tree purchases constitute a significant environmental impact within most American lifestyles."

Greenville County processes about 45,000 to 50,000 tons of yard debris a year, and Christmas trees, while valuable as mulch, are "a drop in the proverbial bucket," Pappin said.

So, then, what of those who live so far in the country that driving a tree to a convenience center uses more gas than just setting the tree in a remote stand of

Jim Smith is the owner of Jim Smith's Christmas Tree Corner on Haywood Road in Greenville. HEIDI HEILBRUNN/STAFF

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woods? Or, maybe, those who simply want to do something on their own?

More ideas

"Every time somebody doesn't throw it out on the street, it takes time and energy to do something right with it," said Cleveland Young, who never could settle on a name this season for his Christmas tree lot in the Stone's Point area of the North Main community downtown.

"There's wealth in those bare materials," Young said. "How we consume and dispose of those materials in a most-efficient and productive manner is important."

The National Christmas Tree Association — a trade group advocating the use of live Christmas trees — has more ideas.

Discarded Christmas trees can be staked in a garden and used as a bird sanctuary for the first year until the branches become brittle enough to break apart by hand, the association said. The trees can be used as sand and soil erosion barriers or sunk in waterways to create fish habitats that attract sport fish.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers encourages the donation of trees for use in Lake Hartwell.

The trees are submerged in suitable areas about 8-12-feet deep, said Corps spokesman Billy Birdwell said. The corps collects trees for that purpose at various locations such as the Twin Lakes boat ramp in Pickens County, the Coneross boat ramp in Townville and Mount Lebanon Elementary School in Pendleton through Jan. 15.

Fishermen can pick up trees but are encouraged not to sink them in main lake channels or around private docks. Greenville County also encourages owners of farm ponds to pick up trees because converting them to fish habitats is considered the "highest end use."

"When we group them together, it makes a nice habitat for juvenile fish," Birdwell said.

The small fish find refuge as they grow. Larger fish congregate hoping for easier prey. Anglers on the top of the food chain look to the Christmas trees for a "hot spot" of activity.

"There are benefits to anglers and there are benefits to the juvenile fish," Birdwell said. "Just watch out if you're a sport fish. "They're looking for you — at the Christmas trees."