

Christmas Tree Recycling

Solid Waste Management Fact Sheet No. 1

Christmas trees can have a new life and purpose through recycling. From small towns to large cities, programs have been developed to turn these trees into wood chips for mulching or placing them in farm ponds and reservoirs for fish habitat.

Setting up a Program

Recycling programs are set up by individual groups or a coalition of groups working together. Sponsors may be Christmas tree growers, park departments, utility companies, Extension Service, arborists, service organizations and private businesses. Bring together sponsors that can provide needed services such as chippers, trash dumpsters, advertising/promotional, hauling to lakes etc.

Determine the number of trees you may be handling. Nationally, it is estimated that .36 of all households or 1 in 7.2 people use live cut Christmas trees. Established Christmas tree recycling programs with dropoff sites usually recover 20 to 40 percent of all trees sold.

Tree recycling programs may be set up from the week before Christmas to mid-January. Encourage tree lot operators to bring in their excess trees. Leftover trees from lots account for around 5 percent of trees available for recycling in many years. Trees that have dried out and are not saleable may come in the week before Christmas. These can be chipped early so that chips are available when the first trees start arriving from homes.

Most larger communities set up tree dropoff sites throughout the community. Volunteers can help to unload trees and remove plastic tree bags. Sponsors with chippers rotate among the sites, converting the trees to fragrant mulching materials. Due to safety concerns, it is best to avoid chipping on busy dropoff days.

Chips are either given away for home landscape use or are used by park departments. Once homeowners and gardeners have learned about these chips, the demand for the chips often exceeds the supply.

Publicity

As with most programs, a variety of publicity methods work best. Flyers that are handed out when trees are sold, or hangtags on the trees are good point of purchase promotional methods. Point of sale promotions should be distributed during Thanksgiving week. Trees come in to retail sales lots usually on the week preceding Thanksgiving and brisk sales start on the Friday after Thanksgiving.

Promotional information can be sent as an insert with utility or major business mailings during December. Newspaper, radio and TV stations like to support positive environmental stories like Christmas tree recycling. Communities have found that press conferences are quite successful on December 26 since it is often a slow news day with few events scheduled. By then, the tree has often been up for several weeks and the family is discussing when to take down the holiday decorations. The family needs to know when and where to take their tree.

Recycling Christmas trees saves valuable landfill space for products that cannot currently be recycled.

Prepared by
Charles W. Marr

Extension Horticulturist, Vegetable Crops

Robert I. Neier
Sedgwick County Extension Agent, Horticulture



Cooperative Extension Service
Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas

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