

We made our yearly trek to the woods this week to find a Christmas tree. I have a habit, when traveling down the road, to evaluate passing trees for Christmas suitability. It isn't that we plan to stop and tree-nap one to put in the cabin for the holiday. Rather, it is just an idle time-passer when I am riding. And it is just as likely I watch for good trees in July as in December.

Going after our yearly Christmas tree in reality is a completely different story. We don't stray from our own property, for one thing. But, most important, we don't look for the perfect tree. Almost any evergreen is pretty and Christmasy when festooned with decorations and lit at night. So, perfection is not the guiding force in our selection of a tree.

There are a few criteria, though. We might, for one reason or another, end up with a tree that does not fit our main requirement. One year, while riding horses in the choppings, we came across a small white pine that was thick and perfect in shape. It would never "amount to anything" as a tree, so we cut it and used it for a Christmas tree. Another time, we saw a tree that had been damaged by another tree's falling, and it would never have a chance for a good future, so we cut it for a Christmas tree.

We have no size requirements, either. One year, our Christmas tree stood on a bench under the window. It was almost a "table tree." Another year, it was a "pencil: tree, something that I discovered later was a trend that year—tall, thick, but very skinny trees. And this year, our tree is big enough to require cutting off both top and bottom.

What we want most to have, though, is a balsam fir, (*abies balsamea*), that native evergreen some people mistake for a spruce. The boughs are soft, dark green, and have striations on the underside of each needle. And, a balsam, a native to our area, has a lovely aroma. It is also slow to drop its needles.

Last year, we had a Christmas tree, of course, but I put up almost no other decorations. We did not even dress the bell pole in greens. We did string lights around the pole, but that was all. This year, I have taken out some traditional Christmas decorations, and the bell pole is covered with greens—white pine, red pine, jackpine, hemlock, Norway spruce, balsam fir, and white cedar. And I added a few red berries from the viburnum in the yard. The lights brighten the dark nights of December.

It doesn't hurt, however unimportant it may be in the big picture, to take a knee for tradition.