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### **Christmas Tree Recycling**

Once again the Christmas holiday season is upon us. And, once again, many families and businesses are beginning the process of decorating for the season. One of the biggest decisions that must be made is whether the celebration should be centered on a real Christmas Tree or an artificial tree.

Over the years, this decision has often been made with an eye toward the disposal of a live tree at the end of the holiday season. Many years ago there were few choices except to discard the tree as part of the holiday trash and waste. However, it has been increasingly the case in recent years that real Christmas trees are headed to a recycling program where they are turned into other useful products.

Colorado Recycles will once again collect information from the community recycling programs, and will publish that information on our website at [www.colorado-recycles.org](http://www.colorado-recycles.org) under our Special Events webpage. The questionnaires will be sent to the counties and cities around Thanksgiving, and we will start publishing the information as soon as it is made available to us. The Christmas Tree recycling information that we provide is relied upon by thousands of Coloradoans, the media and community groups each year. We will leave the information posted as long as it is timely.

The growing, cutting and selling of Christmas trees has become a very large business in the United States. Christmas trees are grown as is any other harvestable crop, and the fields are replanted each time the trees are harvested. According to the National Christmas Tree Association, there are approximately 1,000,000 acres that are devoted to the growing and harvesting of Christmas trees. There is some type or size of Christmas tree growing in every state. Christmas tree growing and harvesting is done by over 15,000 growers, and the industry employs over 100,000 people.

Christmas trees, like most crops, are a renewable resource. Each year, some 30,000,000 Christmas trees are harvested for sale. While most of them will be sold on Christmas tree lots, mail order and e-commerce sales are increasing each year. For each tree that is harvested, at least 2 seedlings will be planted in its place. According to the National Christmas Tree Association, more than 65,000,000 seedlings were planted in the spring of 2002. It will take about 7 years before those seedlings are of a height (about six feet) sufficient for harvesting.

Nationally, approximately 69% of the real Christmas trees are recycled through community programs. However, before you take advantage of a recycling program, please be sure to check with the recycler for important instructions about how to prepare your tree. It is important for the safety of the crews and machinery that all ornaments, lights, tinsel, nails, wire, garlands and stands be removed from the tree. Many recycling programs cannot accept flocked trees. Please

take the time to learn what restrictions may be applicable to your local recycling program. A good rule of thumb is to take your tree to the recycler in the same condition as you would find it naturally in the forest.

One of the reasons that Christmas trees are increasingly recycled is because they have “all natural ingredients”. They are biodegradable, and that property makes them particularly useful in a number of applications. One of the most common uses is for mulch. The tree is simply ground into mulch and then is used to protect other growing plants. The mulch slowly decomposes which provides further nutrients to the plants. Mulching is the most common recycling practice in Colorado. Many of the communities that have Christmas tree recycling programs use the mulch in the parks, flower beds and around trees. Several of the communities also have “give away” programs for residents to pick up mulch for their own plants.

Similar to mulch is chipping. Wood chips made from recycling Christmas trees are good additions to walkways, hiking trails and paths. Many Christmas trees are turned into other useful products. The wood can be used to construct bird feeders and shelters for the garden, yard or community common property. In some cases, the entire tree is erected and birds will gather to the branches for shelter. The tree can always be recycled into mulch when the winter is over.

While it is not used much in Colorado currently, a major use of the natural Christmas trees is for erosion control, soil stabilization and stream bank and shoreline maintenance. Several southern and Midwest states use Christmas trees in this fashion, and Louisiana has an extensive erosion control program. When the trees are used in streams, lakes, and ponds, they not only stabilize the soils but they also provide a valuable habitat for fish, birds, mammals and amphibians.

The Louisiana program has been extraordinarily successful. The state collects the discarded trees, and places them into specially constructed fenced areas along the coastal marshes to protect the coastline from salt water intrusion and to aid in the natural process of sedimentation. More than 600,000 trees have been used in this program. Louisiana undertook this creative preservation and restoration program because the state was losing 25-35 square miles of marsh each year. Louisiana alone accounted for approximately 80% of the nation’s wetland loss per year.