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What to do with your tree after Christmas

If you have a live Christmas tree, how can you responsibly dispose of it after the holiday is over? First you want to make sure you remove your tree before it becomes a fire hazard. You can tell that your tree needs removed when the needles become brittle and the branches are no longer pliant. However, a Christmas tree's useful life does not have to be over once you remove it.

While our first thought might be to toss it in the landfill, this is the most harmful way to dispose of a tree (or other plant material). When landfills are sealed, there is no oxygen for the tree to use while it breaks down. This means the tree will take a much longer time to decompose. Additionally, when the decomposition process takes place without oxygen present, it releases methane, which is a potent greenhouse gas. Instead of a landfill, there are numerous ways you can easily dispose of your tree that will benefit the environment and be more convenient than a trip to the landfill.

The first option is to use the wood for another purpose. If you have access to a woodchipper, you can turn the tree into mulch for your garden or landscape. In addition to sprucing up your garden, mulch helps retain moisture and regulate soil temperatures, which will help your plants when summer comes around. As it breaks down, it will also provide nutrients to your plants for the next few years. You can also chop up the tree for firewood but beware that conifers tend to spark and pop when they burn more than other trees.

If you have access to a pond or lake, you can also use it to make underwater habitat. Simply tie a cinder block or two to trunk tree and sink it in the pond, ideally so that the tree is vertical. The dense, complex branches of an evergreen tree provide shelter for smaller fish, and studies show an increase the biodiversity and abundance of fish in ponds and lakes.

For those of us who do not have time to utilize the wood or create an underwater home for the fish, the best option is to simply put the tree in a quiet spot out in nature and forget about it. This will attract birds and critters that are looking for shelter, giving a boost to local wildlife.

Depending on where you live, your municipality may provide a tree recycling program for you. Some towns and cities will pick up trees that are free of decorations and ornaments from the curb and use them for habitat in local parks and ponds. Check with your town's trash and recycling service to see if this is offered in your area. Whatever option you choose – mulch, firewood, fish habitat, or simply setting it outside – keeping your tree out of the landfill will give it a second life. If you have questions about any of these options, reach out to me for more information!