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Season's Greetings

GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

*"Chill December brings the sleet,
 Blazing hearth and Christmas treat."*

English Folksaying

We have been experiencing the chill of December as we prepare for our Christmas treats. It seems our weather in Virginia is not unlike the weather conditions here in 1774. Nicholas Cresswell, the traveler and diarist, wrote in his journal on December 20th, "Exceedingly cold, frosty and bad weather, the winter is now set in and more severe than ever I felt it in England."

The Christmas traditions of 18th-century Virginia were quite limited. As far as decorating for Christmas, they focused on the church. It was called the "sticking of the church." They used evergreens, holly, ivy, and mistletoe. These greens had special meanings. The garlands of evergreens were symbolic of everlasting life. Laurel served as a protector and was symbolic of purity and victory. Holly had certain beliefs relating to the crucifixion of Christ. The sharp, pointed leaves were associated with Christ's wounds, and the red holly berries represented the blood of Christ. Holly also had an ancient belief that it would serve to protect against witches and the evil eye. Ivy was a symbol of love. Mistletoe carried a great deal of folklore and superstition. It was thought to be protection from thunder and lightning. In Britain it was considered a cure-all and body strengthener. Many countries had their own ideas about mistletoe. In Germany it was believed to have magical powers; it could not only cure illnesses, but could also promote fertility. In some parts of Germany, even today, villagers go knocking on doors saying to neighbors, "Gut hyl-guy hel," meaning "all heal." Mistletoe is also known as a plant of peace. Certainly, the kissing tradition connected with it is conducive to promoting peace! Ireland has an old Christmas tradition associated with holly. Originally, the custom took place throughout all of Ireland, but today it only remains in the westernmost counties. Originally, a gang of boys went out to hunt wrens some weeks before Christmas. They killed the birds, attached the bodies to large holly bushes, then paraded them through the streets. They went in procession shouting and singing the wren song outside peoples' homes until they were paid by the people to go away. Today the custom of the wren boys is carried out on December 26, St. Stephen's Day. It is called going on the wren. They no longer go about killing the wrens, they simply carry holly branches through the streets and sing the same song that has been sung for centuries.

"The wren, the wren, the king of all birds
 St. Stephen's Day was cot in the furze,
 Although he is little his family is great
 Put your hand in your pocket and give us a treat,

Sing holly, sing ivy, sing holly, sing holly,
A drop just to drink it would drown melancholy,
And if you draw it of the best
I hope in heaven your soul will rest,
But if you draw it of the small
It won't agree with the wren boys at all."

It is a rather strange tradition, and I'm not sure I even get the meaning of it, if there is one.

Although it was not an 18th-century tradition in Virginia, I love the Christmas tree.

The first Christmas tree ever recorded was in 1601 in Strasbourg, Germany, which is now part of France. It was written that the tree was decorated with "wafers and golden sugar twists (barley sugar) and paper flowers of all colours."

It is believed that Hessian soldiers, who were fighting for the British during the Revolution, put Christmas trees in their tents at Fort Dearborn in 1777. There are references to some Christmas trees in Pennsylvania in the 1820s, and a man named Charles Follen introduced one in Cambridge in 1832. Ten years later, in 1842 at the Tucker House here in Williamsburg, Charles Mennegrade, a German professor staying with the family, introduced the first Christmas tree here.

In 1846, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, her German husband, had a Christmas tree and the custom developed in Britain. Because of the hostile feelings that existed between the British people and the German monarchy, the tradition of the tree had been slow in developing in Britain until then.

When my children were young we lived in North Carolina and would buy living Christmas trees and plant them in our yard afterward. The benefits of doing this were many: we beautified our property, provided a natural habitat for birds and other wildlife, and we had a constant reminder of the happiness of the Christmas that our family had shared. I recommend this to all of you who are so inclined. There are several kinds of trees available; the most popular one is the Scotch pine. The fir trees, the balsam, Fraser, and Douglas do not usually hold their needles or stay as fresh as long as the Scotch pine, but it is your tree and you should carefully pick one you really love.

You should dig the hole for the tree in your yard before you put the tree in the house for the holiday. Do not make the hole too deep. The most common mistake made in this process comes from planting the tree too deep, causing the tree to suffocate. Save the dirt to back fill the hole. If possible, put it in a wheelbarrow in your garage or shed. Keep the tree indoors as short a time as you can and keep the balled tree roots moist, not soggy, while indoors. When you plant the tree in the hole, make sure the temperature is not below zero, and try to leave some air pockets around the ball. If your tree was bound with a nylon cord or string, be sure to cut that off, but cotton string is all right to leave on. Compost is good to be added to the soil at planting time, but do not add fertilizer until springtime. You might want to stake the tree to prevent the wind from causing the tree to lean. If all is done correctly, with some luck the following Christmas you will have an extra Christmas tree in your yard to decorate if you wish. We have in the past put lights on our planted trees to decorate, but if you want to use natural decorations, you can make stars out of sweet gum balls, tooth picks painted white, paint pine cones gold or silver and add them to your tree. If you are a person who likes to collect shells on the beach, large oyster shells can serve as beautiful decorations. Red shiny

apples from the grocery store can be attached to the outdoor tree and you will create your own apple tree. Each year you can do something different on your outdoor tree and have the family involved in the activities and enjoy that tree over and over again.

"Green, I love you green. Green wind, Green branches." – Federico Garcia Lorca

The Christmas tree is a symbol of the spirit of love and peace, which is what I wish you all.

Merry Christmas!

Janet Guthrie