

Welcome to Vintage Americana, exploring and restoring Rural American culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and this is episode 41 - Trimming the Tree. Let's talk a bit about Christmas decorating, without getting sucked into what the "Influencers" are doing this year.

Before we get started, I'll just let you know that I've started a Facebook page both for the podcast and the blog, if you'd like to keep up to date on things there. And let me know if you'd be interested in a "group" - on facebook, or on MeWe. If you like an episode, now you can share it on Facebook with just a click.

This weekend, my husband and I went into town and ended up getting a small, pink ombre tree for my oldest daughter. Well, she likes it. And while we were there, I took the opportunity to wander through the Christmas tree displays. I do love looking at trees, and Flowerland does a great job. They put up multiple trees, each decorated with a different theme.

Trends start to come out. There was one tree all done in plaid flannel and tomten - the little Swedish Christmas gnomes. Those have been everywhere the last few years. Now, I love folklore. Especially Christmas folklore. And I might even have to make some little tomten for the new pink tree. But I'm not going to saturate my house with them, only to clear them all away to make room for whatever comes next.

The "farmhouse" trend is clearly still going strong, too. Both Flowerland and the craft show I went to on Thanksgiving weekend were replete with all sorts of "rustic" and repurposed elements. Corrugated metal stars, burlap bows, and all the buffalo check one could ask for.

Don't get me wrong - I do love to look at a themed tree. Color coordinated beauties in Red and Gold, or Blue and White - or, because it's trendy, Grey. Really. It's a thing. But at this point in my life - I don't want one. Oh, I might limit the glass balls to a few different colors, just to keep it from being TOO chaotic. But I might not.

I talked to my Dad on the phone the other night. He'd been up in the attic, digging through things and - as is his wont - was trying to get rid of some of it. He offered me both some vintage shiny-bright type bulbs AND the white lace crocheted angels my grandmother had made that were always on our tree.

Both of those are an easy, "Yes, please," for me. Although I might have to split one or both with my sister. However, I do love the worn and loved look of the vintage bulbs. And I actually have Grandma's pattern for the angels - and was struggling with it last year. I'd love to have a few I didn't have to make myself.

Which got me thinking about trees I remember, versus modern trees. We'll talk a little about the ancient divide - natural vs. artificial - first.

The news media, should you choose to believe them, have for a number of years been tracking both a general upswing in Christmas trees of all sorts as well as an increase in the proportion of real trees. I suspect this taps into both nostalgia and a perceived "green" advantage. (Whether or not one is more "sustainable" than the other, I have not investigated).

Artificial trees have been around for a long time. As early as the 1880's, goose feather trees were available. And not long after, one of the brush manufacturers worked out how to use green bristles to create what have since been dubbed "Toilet Brush Trees." The first tree I remember in our house was this kind. And it had it's own peculiar charms.

By the early 60's, shiny aluminum trees like the Everbrite had come into vogue. Its all metal construction made it dangerous to use electric lights, so it came with a light and colorwheel to make it shimmer as the wheel spun.

There followed a relative profusion of styles and colors, that has only gotten more prolific. White, pink, blue, gold - I've even seen black trees. Artificial trees now are commonly prelit, and set up in only a few minutes. Definitely an improvement over the hour or more it used to take us to sort branches, place them one by one into the trunk, and then hang the lights on it.

So what are the pros? Easy to set up, profusion of colors and options - prelit or not, flocked or plain, a single investment. You know exactly what the size is and how it fits in your house. And you DON'T have to worry about keeping it watered - or keeping pets or small children OUT of the water. No needles in your carpet. Less fire risk.

Cons - Well, they do usually still look fake. And they can be expensive. I looked at some of the newer trees while we were shopping. This year's thing seemed to be trees with a

"starry night" effect with lots and lots of micro LEDs doing a gradual fade in and out. For a mere \$1200 for the 7 footer. Ouch. Plus, none of the smell you get from the genuine article. And, if you have a kitty that really wants to climb a tree... a real blue spruce is quite a discouragement.

So, what about real trees? There are lots of places you can go to get them, these days. Big box stores, small church sales, local hardware stores, or to the growers directly. Media chatter (again, for what that's worth) this year has painted a bleak picture for real trees, insisting that there is a "shortage." I notice that the grower associations are pushing back against this idea, insisting that there are plenty of trees from the main growing areas in the Northwest.

Locally, I haven't noticed anything LIKE a shortage. Lots of trees, everywhere you look. And that's even with a lot of people (who DO listen to the media) heading out to get that tree earlier than they usually might. Now, I don't know how the situation stands in more Southern locations, where there might not be a big Christmas tree industry.

I happen to live in Christmas Tree territory. In fact, you can see the marks of it on the landscape. About, hmmm, a little over 20 years ago the price of live trees got quite high. The growers were doing VERY well, even with the easy and quick-growing Scotch Pine. So a lot of people - way to MANY people - who had a little land, went and planted it with Scotch Pine.

Even Econ 101 students will understand what happened next. It takes a while to grow trees to size. And anybody who was on even the back HALF of this trend ended up with salable trees... just as the bottom dropped out of the market. Suddenly, it would cost more to harvest those trees than they would sell to wholesalers. While, at the same time, the local paper factory closed its doors as well. Drive around my county, and you'll see more than one piece of acreage choked with Scotch Pines in neat rows.

And then there are the cut-your-own tree farms. All about a value-added product, these places sell not just the tree - but the experience. You can go out into the woods with your family, find your perfect tree (among carefully cultivated rows of trees planted, maintained, and pruned for the purpose), cut it down, then have it carefully shaken, bound for the trip home, and helpfully tied to the top of your car. Some of them even have equipment to tint your tree a variety of colors, or add cheerful flocking so you can keep that snowy look! True story, one of the farms a pass by on my way to and from

work has a couple bright pink and bright purple trees right out front, in an effort, I suppose, to attract business?

Pros? Nothing beats a real tree, when it comes down to it. Plus, when Christmas is over, you can just pull it outside and put it to use in your compost pile or for biochar, among other things.

Cons? Well, there is the whole "needles in the carpet," and "fire hazard" set of issues. In addition, while artificial trees are expensive, one purchase will last you for years. Real trees aren't cheap, either. Especially some of the finer varieties. A good size, nicely shaped blue spruce might set you back \$80-\$100 in my neighborhood. Plus, they're a little painful to decorate.

I've already mentioned that my childhood tree was an artificial, bottle-brush style. Whereas, my Grandfather always had a real tree. We used to tease Mom rather relentlessly, because her family always went out and cut their own tree. It was always a spruce. And it was always... sparse, I think would be the word. They never failed to pick one with at least a foot between one course of branches and the next. The Christmas lights had to be run out each branch and back to the trunk to avoid whole sections of cord hanging in the air between the branches.

"But you can see all the ornaments!" Mom would protest. And, indeed, you could. From any side of the tree.

In hindsight, I think we may have misjudged. Even by the 80's, the full, thick, cultivated tree was the norm. But it wasn't always that way. Looking now at photos of Christmases from the 40's and 50's, most families had thinner, less perfect trees that we expect now.

It's likely that they, like Grandpa, went out and CUT a tree. Every tree every year in that house came from somewhere on the 80 acre farm. Home grown, free, and regenerating itself, the supply of trees wasn't perfectly pruned, but was perfectly suited to a homegrown holiday.

Now I'm a little sad that our property has no evergreens on it at all. I may have to do a little something about that!

I should, however, take a moment to be sure there isn't TOO much of a nostalgic glow around cutting a tree into the wild. I think maybe I'll tell you a story. And, while it took place at a cut-your-own farm, it illustrates some of the issues you can run into when you get off the beaten path.

One of my friends and co-workers, oh, almost 15 years ago, now, lived in a great big aging Victorian house. It'd been a rough year for the family, so her husband had picked up some over time and Sheila and the girls went out to get their tree.

The house had higher-than-usual ceilings, thanks to its better days as one of the painted ladies downtown. So, Sheila was determined to get a tree tall enough to do it justice. The owner of the tree farm pointed her down a particular path, and directed her out a specific number of rows where she'd find trees that were likely nearer to 8 or 9 feet tall.

Off they went. Soon enough, they found the specified section and wandered around, looking for the right tree. All of them still looked a little... small. So they went a few rows further. This section of the farm had a few trees per row, since most of the others had been harvested in past years. At least, they found the idea tree. Tall and thick, with a nice shape. All three of them took turns with the saw to get it cut down, onto the skid, and dragged back to the parking lot.

The proprietor was a little dubious. Was she sure she wanted THAT tree? It was awful big.

Sheila was sure. Even when the trunk was too thick to fit in the shaker, so they had to skip that part. Even when the tree was too large to fit into the binder that would have wrapped it tightly in net for the trip home.

But, bless his heart the man was determined to help her get that tree home since she wanted it so dearly. So, he and some of his employees got out some regular twine and hand tied it into a tight bundle, then tied it to the top of the Bronco.

Delighted with her success, Sheila took the tree home, then waited for her husband. It took the both of them to get the tree off the Bronco and onto the porch. "It's awful big, isn't it?" he asked.

"The ceilings are nice and high. It'll be perfect," she responded confidently.

So, into the house it went. The tree stand was assemble, the trunk place in it, and the tree levered upright...

Only to find that the top foot or so was laying horizontally along the ceiling. It was, in fact, too tall.

Down it came, back outside, a good 18 inches cut off the bottom, and then stood up again. Just right! The angel would just brush the ceiling.

Ready to decorate, Sheila cut away the bindings. And the enormous tree, finally freed, now dominated not only the corner in which it was set up, but also laid across half the couch and all of the chair on the other side.

With the increase in height, can a corresponding increase in girth! The thing was huge.

But! It was their tree.

So back outside, where branches could be cut off one side and the tree sculpted to fit into the corner. Now it still had a massive presence - but it wasn't sharing the furniture with anyone. Martha Stewart herself could not have done better.

Once the tree was up, the next step of course, was lights! All of the strings were pulled out of the closet, hooked together and... only managed to cover about 2/3 of the tree.

Both of Sheila's daughters were delighted, because that meant a trip out to Target. More lights. More ornaments. And a few other things because - hey, they were there!

Back home, the extra lights now made the tree a sparkling wonder. The girls had brought out the old ornaments, and opened the new boxes, ready to start decorating.

Thing is - the tree had now been inside for a few hours. Slowly warming up. Along with the entire family of field mice who had taken up residence somewhere inside the tree.

The other purpose of the shaker back at the tree farm? It gets rid of any excess of woodland creatures who probably don't want to come home with us any more than WE want them to come home!

Rather than, say - running down a branch, onto the arm of a teenage girl, and setting off a good 10 to 15 minutes of shrieking, running, squealing, dashing outside, and then a more concerted effort to evict the mice.

"Next year," Sheila said with a sigh, when telling us the whole saga, "I'm going to just get a NORMAL tree."

Ok, we can all have a laugh at Sheila. And, honestly, that story was probably the best thing she got for Christmas that year.

But it is REALLY hard to judge the size of a tree when you're outside. Especially if you don't do it often. Which is why U-cut farms try to direct you to specific plots of trees that should all be the size you're looking for. Or might even have measuring sticks in the shape of an L that you can hold up next to the tree and get a better idea of how big it REALLY is.

And, of course, you have to account for not just height but also girth. The new "pencil" style artificial trees sometimes give us a false expectation for what real trees are like.

Then, of course, whenever you bring in something from the outdoors, it might have passengers. Be warned.

If you've got evergreens on your property, though, why not bring one in as your tree? Don't feel like it needs to conform to the stereotypical perfect, conical specimen. A homegrown tree perfectly suits a homestead Christmas.

We've got a lot of work to do on our property, and some of that will necessarily involve some planting of trees. I think it wouldn't be a bad idea at all to make sure I include some evrgreens. And also to see where I can incorporate other trees and shrubs that can serve as a source of Christmas decoration over the years. Holly, cedar, juniper, pine, spruce, whatever else seems to fit the bill.

And it shouldn't be TOO hard to do. Some of the shrub-type specimens could be worked into the hedge I want to plant. And maybe even just spotted about in the landscape. While a few evergreen trees as a windbreak toward the northwest corner of the property is probably smart on several levels. And, while I don't have enough room to expect to be able to cut down a tree every year for Christmas, it's worth looking into coppice growth

of evergreens. I might have to get out Emmet Van Dreische's book, "Carving Out a Living on the Land," and give it a re-read. In fact, he uses the trimmings from the trees to make wreaths, as well. So, a good grove of evergreens might supply not just trees, but also wreaths, garlands, or swags as needed.

It's a bit like planning the summer garden and landscape to provide cut flowers, but on a longer time scale.

The landscape might even provide more than just greenery. One thing I've seen over the years, both in antique stores and craft shows, is garlands made of nuts or acorns. Sometimes they're painted, sometimes not. And, if you're going to make a garland out of acorns, it's smart to glue the tops on, as they're prone to fall off.

Everything from garlands of walnuts painted gold, to acorns interspersed with small wooden beads, to other nuts combined with glass beads all give a festive air AND bring a little of the outside in at the same time. You're also less likely to need to worry about the dog or cat eating the garland (and worse, the string), than with more traditional choices like popcorn or cranberries.

I do think you can take the idea too far, if you're not careful. You won't find snowflakes made out of twigs or pine cones wrapped in yarn on my tree. Nor the old milkweed pods, dried and painted silver, that my grandmother made. I never really understood that idea.

You WILL find embroidered felt ornaments on my tree. And I still intend to make some of those crocheted angles and snowflakes. There is something to be said for soft, unbreakable ornaments. Especially with the kids and the dogs. Maybe the new pink tree could use some tiny stuffed tomten, what do you think?

For that matter, I've spotted some awfully cute crocheted garlands. I'll try to link one for you in the show notes. Or a garland of knitted tiny hats, mittens, or stockings. I lost myself for an hour or two on Pinterest, and now I have to go shopping for styrofoam balls so I can knit some ornaments, too. I mean, could there be anything cuter than felt Tomten and Norwegian-sweater patterned baubles? No. No, there could not.

If you're not into needlework, what about some wooden ornaments? I remember Dad taught me to use his scroll saw when I was a kid by having me cut out all a bunch of thin

plywood shapes that his mother wanted to paint as ornaments. It's really not a bad idea. If the wood is thin enough, they're lightweight. And entirely customizable! Etsy has some super cute downloadable pdf versions. I saw some snowglobes, snowflakes, and even a whole nativity. If you did animal silhouettes, you could paint them like your livestock and have a perfect farmstead Christmas tree. Or do painted wood slice ornaments. I found a youtube video for some very cute themed versions, I'll put into the shownotes on the website.

Perhaps you prefer something more sparkly. Beaded ornaments can be really beautiful. And I'm not talking about the "plastic beads and pipecleaner" candy cane ornaments from the 80's. Although if you're nostalgic for those, do your thing. Can you still get those old tricorned beads? I don't even know.

At any rate, once again, Etsy is a deep and wide source for patterns for beaded ornaments. Some are worked beaded netting with a glass or satine bauble inside. Others are entirely made of beads. I'll like some examples on the web page, again. I might have to make some of the stars. Because I do love a good sparkly! If you're going to try some of these (and they're lovely) my advice would be to NOT buy your beads at your local big box store. I've done some beadwork, and I have noticed that the quality control is important. When you're working these sorts of designs, those beads need to be very symmetrical. So splurge on the good stuff from one of the online retailers. You'll thank me later.

In fact, if there is a craft, there is probably a tutorial for a Christmas ornament made with that craft. I've seen lovely smocked versions, sewn or quilted, papercrafted, Japanese Temari thread versions, and even straw or paperweaving.

Think about what fits best for you and your family. I tend to look for unbreakable stuff, so that ornaments that fall off the tree are less of an issue. We also tend to have a vintage vibe, which should surprise absolutely nobody. The house project, as designed as a Swedish farmhouse, also leans us a little bit toward a Scandinavian flavor. Hence, the tomten. And while I'm still referring to it as "the imaginary house," because conditions are such that it isn't going to get built right away, I CAN start making ornaments for that tree. Knitted baubles, mittens, and hats with Norwegian patterns. Wooden bead garlands. Painted wood slices with tomten or aurora borealis scenes. On a clear night, we might even be able to watch the Aurora from the yard.

You CAN go out and get a perfect tree, then decorate it according to the latest trends. And give all those decorations to the thrift store in a couple of years as you trade out for the next trend.

Or you can embrace a perfectly imperfect Christmas. Maybe the tree is a little wonky. Maybe it's even so sparse you can see ALL the ornaments. The ones the kids have made blending in just fine with the other handmade ornaments that have been on the tree for Christmas after Christmas, and some vintage baubles that have spots of oxidation on them.

I hope I've given you some ideas for making your Christmas tree all your own. And not worrying if it wouldn't look at home in the displays at the store or on Instagram. It's more satisfying, and you'll likely spend more time enjoying the process of decorating a tree when you're less concerned about it looking perfect. Recapture an old-fashioned Christmas with a homestead tree. Even if you don't go cut it down yourself, you can enjoy finding and making decorations. Maybe you'll add a painted wooden cow or pig each year, to commemorate 4H animals. Maybe you'll sew a tiny apron ornament out of the same fabric that you made your cookie-baking apron with. Put the spirit of home and family back on the tree.

If you've enjoyed this episode, think about following the podcast and sharing it with somebody you know who might like it, too. If you're a step ahead of me on this, take picture of your tree, post it to Instagram and tag me! Drop by the website at [brambleberry meadow.com](http://brambleberry-meadow.com) for some Christmas baking later this week, too.

It might be time for me to go shop for some beaded ornament patterns. Or maybe work on those felt 12 days of Christmas ornaments. And then there were the knitted baubles. So many options, but I'm definitely in the mood for some Christmas crafting.

Are you coming?