

5 ways to use...

your Christmas tree

Enjoy the festive season... then, in the spirit of thriftiness, here are five things you could do outdoors to use up every last bit of your tree. By **Julie Mountain**



GROW YOUR OWN TREE

Growing a Christmas tree from a cutting can be a hit-and-miss affair, but it's worth a try. It will work best if you take young stems, from a young tree, and do it as soon as you take possession of the tree.

Stems should be around 10cm long, and you'll need to strip the bottom two thirds of leaves or needles. Dip the bare stems into hormone rooting powder (available from all garden centres) and plant each cutting into a small pot of moist potting compost. Loosely cover each pot with a transparent plastic bag and place them in a tray or on saucers, so that they can be watered from the base when necessary.

A sunny windowsill will be perfect – but don't expect all of them to 'take'. If the remaining leaves are green, the chances are the cutting is alive, but it can take up to six weeks for tiny roots to sprout. Once you're sure the cuttings have taken (tug very gently on the cutting – if there's some resistance, it's working!), you can remove the bag and start to acclimatise your Christmas tree to its new environment.



A SKELETON TREE

Leaving the tree in its stand, take it outdoors and leave it for a week or so, without watering it. As the needles start to fall, give it a good shake to remove as many as you can, so you're left with a 'skeleton' tree. Spend the rest of



A tree chopped up and stored



winter 'redecorating' your tree, this time with objects found in your outdoor space, or on journeys around your neighbourhood.

You could suspend your journey sticks (see 'Five ways to explore... sticks, at www.nurseryworld.co.uk), collect leaves from other species of tree and attach them, find empty snail shells, feathers, pebbles with holes in, pine cones... anything the children find that will tell a story about your outdoor space or the local environment.



MAKE WOOD COOKIES

Wood cookies are slices of tree trunks and branches – you'll need to strip the tree of its last remaining spindly branches before you begin. Sawing by hand is time-consuming – see if you can borrow an electric saw or a chop saw, which will make much neater cuts in a fraction of the time.

Once you have dozens of cookies, ask children to sand them smooth to reduce the risk of splinters. The largest make excellent 'plates' in your mud kitchen, the smallest are just right for medals, coins and pendants. Use child-sized hand drills to make holes through the cookies (fresh softwoods are easy to drill this way) to thread ribbons through, and decorate the cookies with chalks, marker pens or nail polishes.



BURN IT!

If you don't have a fire circle, place a large turkey-roasting tin on a layer of bricks and build a small fire in that.

Christmas trees are generally freshly cut, so once your tree is chopped into suitable pieces, allow them to 'season' outdoors for a few months before burning them, or they'll produce unpleasant smoke.

See 'Let's explore... fire' at www.nurseryworld.co.uk for how to introduce fire safely to children.



A WOODCHIP PARTY

Wood chips are a super resource for nursery gardens – compelling in freely chosen loose-parts play, vital in weed control and mulching your veggie plot, bouncy under play equipment, and perfect for the mud lab... but keeping up the supply can be costly. Plan a woodchip party: ask parents to bring in their used trees, and hire a chipper. They are widely available from plant hire companies and cost around £100 for a day.

Children will squeal with delight as they watch (from a safe distance) those Christmas trees being eaten up and then flying out the other end of the chipper as tiny pieces. Then they can spend the next week engaged in the vigorous activity of transporting chips to the various locations they are needed for.

And another thing...

The sap in freshly cut conifers can be allergenic; if you're unsure, wear garden or washing up gloves when handling newly cut Christmas trees. Once they have dried out, the sap is less irritating and they are perfectly safe to play with. ■