

Christmas Trees in Australia



Most Australian Christmas traditions have predominately derived from our British heritage, as well as European influences and later the American commercial influences. The tradition of the Christmas tree in Australia has its roots in Victorian England when Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, popularized its use in England during the mid nineteenth century. The fashion quickly spread throughout the colonies and the Christmas tree has since become an integral element of Australian Christmas celebrations.

The tradition of the Christmas tree has pagan ritual origins. Originally, evergreen trees were symbols of life and fertility among some European cultures. They were used in ceremonies and festivals during the winter solstice. This symbol was merged with the celebration of Christmas leading to the tree's Christian beginnings.

Some traditions (wrongly) credit St Boniface an 8th century a monk from Crediton, Devonshire, who went to Germany with the invention of the Christmas tree. Two common versions of the legend persist. In one, St Boniface is said to have used a triangular sprig of Fir tree to symbolize the holy trinity to unbelievers whom subsequently adopted the fir tree as a Christian symbol. The other popular version is that St Boniface cut down the legendary Donar Oak (also known as Thor's Oak) sacred to the local pagan Germanic peoples. This version again divides with some versions believing St Boniface planted a fir tree there, but the most common idea is that a fir tree grew spontaneously in the oak's place.

The custom of erecting and decorating a tree to coincide with Christmas celebrations can be historically traced to 16th century Livonia (present-day Estonia and Latvia) and 16th century Northern Germany. Though the Christmas tree custom spread through Germany, the tradition did not become widespread throughout Europe until 19th Century. In England the first Christmas tree was erected by the Georgian royal Queen Charlotte in Windsor Lodge in 1800, however it was Queen Victoria who made the tree fashionable throughout Britain and her colonies

In Europe, the original and still most common tree used is the Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*). Other popular choices include Silver Fir (*Abies alba*), Nordmann Fir (*Abies nordmanniana*), Noble Fir (*Abies procera*), Serbian Spruce (*Picea omorika*), Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), and Swiss Pine (*Pinus cembra*).

In Australia, the Monterey Pine (*Pinus radiata*), a species originating in California, and widely grown in South-eastern Australia, is the most widely used tree. Available as a cut tree, it is a common sight throughout the country in the lead up to Christmas eve. They are commonly seen strapped to car rooftops, stuffed into boots and in the back of SUVs on their journey to homes, where they end up propped in a bucket standing decorated in a corner until the increasing drop of pine needles forces their disposal. Sadly, post Christmas their brown and withered form is often seen abandoned on nature strips, in illegal roadside rubbish dumps, protruding from green waste bins, or as bonfire fuel.

Artificial trees were introduced in the mid 20th century trees and brought the best of kitsch to Christmas, while "environmentally friendly" living Christmas trees became commercially available during the 1980's. The most popular choices being Australian native Norfolk Island Pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*) and the Dwarf White Spruce (*Picea glauca* 'Conica'). Unfortunately, the latter commonly suffers a lingering death, dying slowly from neglect never making it to a second Christmas.

Do indigenous conifers have place in Australian Christmas tradition? Just as the BBQ prawn is replacing the roast turkey on Christmas day and the Easter Bilby the Easter Bunny, it would then seem a natural progression to draw upon local flora for Christmas decorations. Indeed, Australian flora has appeared as Christmas decorations since the mid 19th Century with several Australian native plants becoming associated with Christmas. It was refreshing for the Europeans settlers who were used to celebrating Christmas during the bleak winter dormancy to be surrounded by colourful summer wildflowers. Due to their flowering period coinciding with the Christmas season such plants are referred to as 'Christmas plants'. The association with Christmas is usually generally reflected in the local 'common names'. Some examples include: Christmas Bells (*Blandfordia grandiflora*, *B.nobilis*), NSW Christmas Bush (*Ceratopetalum gummiferum*), Victorian Christmas Bush (*Prostanthera lasianthos*), Tasmanian and South Australian Christmas Bush (*Bursaria spinosa*), Christmas Orchid (*Calanthe triplicate*), and Christmas Tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*). Even tree fern fronds Tree Ferns (probably *Dicksonia antarctica*) were popular as Christmas decorations in 19th Century Australia.

Australia has several indigenous conifers, which other than the previously mentioned include: Bunya Pine (*Araucaria bidwillii*), Hoop Pine (*Araucaria cunninghamii*), Norfolk Island Pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*), Huon Pine (*Lagarostrobos franklinii*), Cheshunt pine (*Diselma archeri*), Kauri Pine (*Agathis robusta*), Celery-top pine (*Phyllocladus aspleniifolius*), King Billy pine (*Athrotaxis selaginoides*), Pencil pine (*Athrotaxis cupressoides*), and Cypress Pines (*Callitris* spp.). Of this group, few have a form or growth rate that readily lends itself as a substitute to the Norway Spruce or Monterey Pine. Norfolk Island and Hoop Pines however are exceptions with their fast growth rate and regular form created by whorled of branching.

Although we admit to not having the same fashion influence as Queen Victoria, it will be interesting to test the acceptance of native conifers during Australian festive seasons in the future.