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DEAL OF THE DAY by Kelli B. Grant (Author Archive)

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How to Trim Christmas Tree Costs

SHOPPERS CUTTING BACK this holiday season can trim a Christmas tree and their budget in one evening.

Christmas tree sales have bounced back this year with broader holiday spending. In the two weeks after Thanksgiving, sales of Christmas trees were up 6.5% and 3%, respectively, over the comparable weeks in the prior year, according to a survey of Christmas tree sellers by the market research firm ISI Group. (In 2008, real tree sales for the entire season dropped 10% and artificial tree sales fell 35%, according to the National Christmas Tree Association, an industry group.)

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Real or artificial, it's easy to spend more than \$100 on a tree, depending on the size and variety you want. But there are plenty of ways to save as much as 50% -- even with only a few shopping days left.

"The closer it gets to Christmas, the more sellers cut prices," says Heather Wagenhals, the founder of Unlock Your Wealth Foundation, a coaching group in Scottsdale, Ariz.

There's no need to settle for the scrawniest tree on the lot, either. Here's how to score a Christmas tree for less:

Get a live tree

If you've decided to buy a real tree, go a step further and get a live tree (one that has the roots intact) instead of one that's been cut. Prices are usually just a quarter of those for a cut tree, as little as \$15, says Amelia Baker, owner of Green Alternatives, an eco-friendly general store in Norfolk, Va. The trade off: live trees tend to max out at 5 feet to 6 feet tall, with most in the 3 feet to 4 feet range.

Live trees can also save you money after the holidays. Planted strategically in your yard, they can cut annual energy bills by up to 25%, according to the Department of Energy. (For more, click [here](#).) Apartment dwellers may be able to donate the tree to a local parks department or tree-planting group for a tax deduction. (Check with community organizations via the Alliance for Community Trees list [here](#).)

Leave the lot

Don't make a beeline for your nearest department store (artificial tree) or garden center tree lot (real tree). Craft stores, home improvement centers and grocery stores may offer better deals. Todd Havens of Los Angeles has purchased his tree at his local Lowe's (**LOW: 20.74***, **-0.59**, **-2.76%**) for three years. Last week, he bought a 6-foot Douglas Fir there for \$19.98. "People never believe it's a \$20 tree," he says.

Clip coupons

Stores have already begun discounting their stock of artificial Christmas trees. At JCPenney (**JCP: 23.37***, **-2.11**, **-8.28%**), a four and a half foot-tall white, pre-lit tree is now \$100, a discount of 50%. Kmart has also cut prices in half on several trees, including a 7-foot, pre-lit Fraser Fir (now \$130) and a 4 1/2-foot, pre-lit Shenandoah Pine (now \$60).

Many retailers accept coupons on real trees, too. Armstrong Garden Centers in California recently offered a printout

MARKETS	MY QUOTES	MOST ACTIVE		
Index	Price	Chg.	% Chg.	
DJIA	10634.49	-39.89	-0.37%	
Nasdaq	2283.52	-11.84	-0.52%	
S&P 500	1120.26	-5.60	-0.50%	
Russell 2000	655.66	-6.20	-0.94%	
10 Yr Bond	2.90	-0.06	-2.03%	
DJ Total Market Index	11667.60	-68.18	-0.58%	
S&P 400	768.99	-5.93	-0.77%	
Nasdaq 100	1891.81	-7.18	-0.38%	
DJ Transportation	4443.09	-61.21	-1.36%	

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coupon on its web site for 20% off precut trees. The center also offers a decoration package of one 5-to-6-foot tall tree, three poinsettias, one ten-foot garland and a mixed wreath for \$100 -- a savings of \$33.

Haggle

Many tree lot operators paid just \$15 to \$20 for a cutting permit, or purchased their lots contents wholesale from farms for just a few dollars per tree. "The profit margins are huge," Wagenhals says. So many sellers are willing to negotiate, especially as it gets closer to Christmas. Wagenhals suggests making a first offer of half the selling price, and working your way up from there.

Buy post-holiday

If you're going to invest in an artificial tree, wait until after the holidays to get one for next year. Carole Horstmeyer of St. Louis bought her 6-foot, pre-lit tree from Jo-Ann Fabrics and Crafts in 2006 for \$25 -- 75% off its original \$100 price tag. "It should last for at least 10 years, so that works out to \$2.50 a year," she says.

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