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Christmas Tree through the ages

The direct ancestor of the modern–day Christmas tree appears to have come from the Germanic peoples of central Europe who decorated and worshipped trees in the midwinter season. Several stories have been perpetuated to explain how this pagan custom of worship for a tree became part of the Nativity celebrations:

In the 8th century, the English monk St Boniface was on a missionary visit to Germany when he is said to have introduced worship for the maker of the tree in place of worship for the tree itself. He cut down a sacred oak tree on Christmas Eve and from its roots a fir tree grew.

A German legend tells of a snowy Christmas Eve when a forester and his family took in a cold, hungry boy who knocked at their door. The family warmed and fed the child before putting him to sleep in their best bed. The following morning, the child broke a branch from a fir tree and planted it by the house door where it immediately blossomed.

Germany was also the setting in medieval times for a play about Adam and Eve in which the Garden of Eden was represented by a fir tree festooned with apples. A so-called Paradise tree, hung with wafers, was later set up in homes on 24 December, Adam and Eve's Day. Attempts by the Catholic Church to eradicate tree worship were lifted at the Reformation, when midwinter tree worship resurfaced in the guise of a form of Paradise tree now called the Christmas tree. In the early 16th century, Martin Luther, the leader of the German Reformation, is said to have compared the candles on a decorated Christmas tree to the starry heavens.

Oh Tannenbaum...

Thanks to the technology of cloning, we are a step closer to the perfect Christmas tree. Do you remember trying to choose the best Christmas tree and not finding it? This one was a bit bare at the top, that one had a skinny branch further down; in short, none was perfect - just like us, and you had to live with a less-than-perfect Christmas tree and hide its shortcomings.

These times might soon be over, we are led to believe. The Forestry Department of a US University is focussing its efforts on cloning the perfect tree. The first step is to find trees that are really select, the one tree in 10'000. This flawless tree should have the following properties: a straight trunk that easily slips into a stand; the strength to hold lots of ornaments and tinsel; thick needles; good colour; limbs angling upwards at 45 degrees; a uniform conical shape tapering upwards at 35-45 degrees; good needle retention. Growers want these properties to be coupled with rapid growth and disease and insect resistance. Mass production of such super-trees should cut costs.

Once the super-tree has been selected, it is cloned to produce a field of identical trees. One method is to take a bud from the tree, sterilize it to kill fungi and bacteria, place it in a nutrient medium that promotes growth into a callus, a clump of randomly dividing cells. The callus can be broken into many pieces, each of which puts out shoots, which are then placed in a medium that causes roots to grow, using hormones. From there each shoot becomes a whole tree again.

Another method of creating a super-tree is by genetic engineering, in which genes are inserted into the tree to introduce novel and desirable characteristics.

I think I'll stick with the old Christmas tree, a bit lopsided, a bit bare in places, but, with all its flaws an individual and unique – just like me. *tb*

Christmas Feasts

In 1252, Henry III entertained a thousand knights and peers at York; the Christmas feast was so costly that the local archbishop donated 600 oxen towards the feasting.

A century and a half later, Richard II provided 2000 oxen for 10'000 guests at Christmas. Edward IV fed more than 2000 people each day at Eltham over the Christmas period of 1482.

This lavish hospitality was extended for a good reason: to bind alliances and strengthen community bonds. In this way, kings underwrote feudal relationships. Part of the seasonal package was for the powerful to attend to the needs of the powerless, for instance by serving them dinner, an inversion that helped to ease tensions between the strong and the weak and thereby reinforce the status quo.