

Where Did the Tradition of the Christmas Tree Come From?

Each year, when the weather gets colder and December approaches, many Americans who celebrate Christmas will get together to decorate a [Christmas tree](#). But why in the world do we decorate these (often artificial) fir trees in the first place?

It turns out, the meaning behind Christmas trees as holiday decor goes back further than you might realize.

Both the ancient Egyptians and Romans saw the bright hue of plants that remained green all year, such as palm rushes and evergreen boughs, as a way to give warmth and hope to people during the winter, according to [History.com](#).

Ancient people would mark the winter solstice (the shortest day and longest night of the year, which typically falls on December 21 or December 22) by using evergreens. These plants served as a sunny reminder that other greens would grow again once spring and summer returned.

People in some countries believed evergreens stood for everlasting life and even had the ability to ward off evil spirits and illnesses—another reason for the tradition of hanging evergreen boughs above doorways and inside homes.

1444

[Some say](#) the first-ever Christmas tree was in London, near what is now Leadenhall Market. However, it seems it was a one-time trend, as Christmas trees wouldn't be back in Britain until the 19th century.

1500s

Many believe Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, began the tradition of adding lighted candles to a tree, which is why we decorate trees with strands of lightbulbs today. The story goes that while Luther was walking home one winter evening, he saw twinkling stars among evergreens and wanted to re-create the magical moment for his family.

1771

While Christmas trees were appearing in Germany years earlier, the trend really caught on after writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [visited Strasbourg](#), near the German border, and included the concept in his novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

1820s

The first record of a decorated evergreen tree in America was that of German settlers in Pennsylvania.

1846

Queen Victoria, German Prince Albert, and their children were shown standing around a Christmas tree in the [Illustrated London News](#). Because Victoria was very popular with her subjects at that time, the Christmas tree trend took off in both Britain and the East Coast of the United States.



Christmas with Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, their children and Queen Victoria's mother, in 1848 as depicted in the Illustrated London News. Getty Images

1882

When Edward H. Johnson, the vice president of Edison's Electric Light company, decorated a tree with 80 red, white, and blue lightbulbs and displayed it in his New York City window, a newspaper in Detroit helped him earn the title "[Father of the Electric Christmas Tree.](#)"

1895

Some Americans were still skeptical about using electric lights on their Christmas trees, although apparently not President Grover Cleveland. He is said to have introduced [the first electrically lit White House Christmas tree.](#)

1903

General Electric began selling Christmas light kits so that people could decorate their Christmas trees more easily than ever.

1917

But it was [Albert Sadacca](#) who is believed to have really made Christmas tree lights mainstream. The New York teenager had heard about a candlelit tree that burst into flames and started stringing lights for his family's novelty business. Painting the bulbs proved to be the ticket—and one day his business became NOMA Electric Company (National Outfit Manufacturer's Association), the largest Christmas light manufacturer in the world for many years.

1931

The [first Christmas tree went up in Rockefeller Center](#)—only it was a lot smaller than the ones debuted these days. And

instead of an official lighting before a crowd of spectators, this one was orchestrated by construction workers.

1933

Two years later, a lighted tree was placed in Rockefeller Center, sparking the city's annual tradition.



The Christmas tree at Rockefeller Plaza on December 20, 1934. Getty Images

Today

After a rich history, [Christmas trees](#) (both real and artificial) have become the centerpiece of the season—and a classic Christmas tradition that doesn't appear to be going anywhere anytime soon.