

Can Goats Eat Christmas Trees?



Can goats eat Christmas trees? What do you have to be aware of as far as hazards to your sweet goats? Which species of pine are ok and which trees should not be given to goats? These are popular questions during the later part of December.

Many of us will have spent hard earned dollars, purchasing a fresh cut tree from a local tree lot. After the tinsel and ornaments have been removed, using the tree as a food option in the barnyard can add value to the money spent on a fresh cut tree. So can goats eat Christmas trees? What about sheep, cattle, and even the chickens? The genus Pine contains a lot of plants, some not even true pines. Yew is not in the genus

of Pinus, (its actually a member of the Taxus genus). Yew is often confused with pine but can cause toxicity and illness in most animals.

Many of the popular varieties selected as Christmas trees can be used as a food supplement in limited quantities. The White pine, and Scotch pine are common along with the Fraser Fir, Douglas Fir and the Blue Spruce. With any edible, I never recommend over feeding. Illness can result just from the upset in the diet routine. Stick with the old adage of everything in moderation.



photo credit Glen Miller

Can Goats Eat Christmas Trees and

Receive Health Benefits?

Pine needles provide trace nutrients, antioxidants, minerals, and forage. Trees should not replace the normal forage, grain or other feed material. Pine is good for intestinal worm control and high vitamin C content. Some varieties contain higher amounts of Vitamin A, too. In addition, the activity of chowing down on a tasty novelty, interrupts the boring days of winter and eating only hay.

Chickens Can Enjoy the Pine Christmas Tree, too!

Not only can goats eat Christmas trees, but the chickens will enjoy either nibbling or playing with the pine needles and branches. The entire Christmas tree can provide a wind break in the chicken run, and an activity center for bored chickens. If you live in an area that doesn't get very cold, the chickens will find insects among the tree branches too.

What Problems Can Arise?

Pine needles can cause abortion in cattle, if eaten in varying quantities. Although cattle and sheep and goats are all ruminants, the absorption mechanisms in cattle seems to have more of a problem with pine. Problems seem to be documented with certain plants in the pine genus. Ponderosa Pine, Lodgepole Pine, and Monterey Pine have documented incidents of causing premature birth and abortions in cattle. The Yew is another member of this group that can be extremely toxic. Horses and ponies can colic from too much pine.



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What Amount of Pine is Safe?

Can goats eat Christmas trees if toxicity is a potential issue? one tree per small flock of ten to twelve animals isn't enough to cause toxicity issues. Goats eating nothing but pine bark, branch tips, and needles, every day can lead to toxicity and abortion, along with other health risks. Cattle seem to be more susceptible to pine toxicity.

What I have found concerning toxic plants is this. In truth, it's like so many toxic plants on lists. They'd get full before they ever had any toxicity issues. Or they'd have to eat it for a long time period. If the toxic plant is the only choice, the ruminant or chicken will eat it. If there is plenty of other nutritious food available, the animal will not normally choose to eat the toxic plant. In short, a small amount of pine Christmas tree will add nutrients and not cause harm to your flock.



photo credit Glen Miller

Can Goats Eat Christmas Trees from Sale Lots?

What about the toxicity of man-made products applied to Christmas trees. This is a topic that always comes up when talking about feeding fresh cut trees to livestock and poultry. Some large retailers still apply a fire retardant spray or a colorant to the trees. Ask your seller about this. This article shares that the fire retardant spray is a green color that can be seen on the trunk and some of the branches. The tree may appear to be a brighter green than you would expect. In any case, ask questions and inspect the tree carefully if you are planning to feed the tree to your farm animals.



We try to avoid chemicals of most types when caring for our farm animals. I was surprised to read that this Virginia Cooperative Extension report suggests that the colorants and sprays are no more harmful than household chemicals! I sure wouldn't feed my goats any of those household chemical cleaners either!

Check with your seller before assuming that a tree is all natural. If you buy your tree from a small independent lot, they should know where the trees came from and how they were prepared for sale. If you cannot be certain, don't feed the tree to the goats, sheep and chickens.

Common Pine Varieties Used as Christmas Trees

White pine, scotch pine, Fraser fir, and other varieties commonly found on the tree lot can provide nutrients to your goat, sheep and chicken diets. Some varieties may be more

desirable than others. Sheep tend to dislike the scotch pine needles due to the more prickly nature. Goats are not usually as tender in the mouth and may not discriminate as much as the sheep.

After feeding the tree to the barnyard animals, the trunk and branches can be recycled further into wood chips. The wood chips can be added to the garden area, or the poultry run to cover muddy areas. Goats, Sheep and even the chickens, can help you recycle the Christmas tree and keep it from ending up in the landfill. There are healthy nutrients in the tree and feeding it to your barnyard animals is safe in occasional small doses. Pine needles are healthy for humans too. Try a pine needle tea for what ails you with a winter cold. For more ideas on recycling the fresh Christmas tree, look here.

For more goat care info including information on goats and Christmas trees, check with Feather and Scale Farm. If you don't own your own goats or chickens, check with local farmers to see if they can put your Christmas tree to use on their farm. This Maine radio station even connected local residents to a goat farm!



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