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# John Kelly's Washington

Metro columnist

## Do You Smell What I Smell?

By John Kelly

Wednesday, December 21, 2005; Page C13

*O tannenbaum, O tannenbaum. Where is your odor, tannenbaum?*

I remember a time when I could walk into my house each December and be struck by the telltale smell of Christmas -- pow, like a piney 2-by-4 across my nose.

Lately, though, my trees -- whether bought pre-cut at the corner lot or freshly "harvested" by my saw-wielding hand -- have seemed rather subdued. Pretty, yes, but nearly as odor-free as a cube of scrubbed porcelain. What's up?

"You could be getting a different species," said Rick Dungey of the National Christmas Tree Association. "Some are stronger than others."

Pines, Rick said, are practically unscented. Firs are more odorous. So are spruces, though their needles have an unpleasant aroma when crushed.

"We hate [blue spruce]," said Cindy Stacy, whose family runs the Pinetum tree farm in Garrett County. "First, it's prickly as a tree, so it hurts your hands when you're trying to decorate it. Second, it smells like cat pee. That's fine if you want that smell in your house."

I don't want that smell in my house. I want Christmas tree smell. (We usually get a fir.)

"Smell is very subjective," said Rick. "It changes as you get older. It could be something in your olfactory system."

In other words, maybe it's not the trees. Maybe it's my nose. Maybe it's leading the way in the inevitable physical decay that awaits my eyes, ears, hips, prostate, etc.

Our sense of smell does worsen as we get older, said Charles Kimmelman, a Manhattan otolaryngologist affiliated with Cornell University's Weill Medical College. "But that decline is clinically detectable when we measure it in most people after the age of 60," he said.

So my nose isn't licked yet.

Jim Corliss, past president of the National Christmas Tree Association, who runs a farm in Newburgh, Maine, tried to solve the puzzle. He took my family history, and then surmised that because I spent time growing up in Arizona and Texas, I probably had Douglas firs, shipped in from the Northwest.

They have "a very distinctive odor," he said.

Perhaps, but I remember smellier trees from just a decade ago in the Washington area. Is it global warming? Or yet another liberal plot to diminish Christmas?

No. We might be seeing an unintended consequence of progress, said John Frampton, a forestry professor at North Carolina State University.

Many evergreen species smell more the more stress they're under. But the modern Christmas tree industry is about *reducing* stress. Growers wait as long as they can before cutting, then keep the trees in shaded, irrigated holding yards and ship them in refrigerated trucks. Consumers are told to make a fresh cut and keep the water in the stand topped up. The result is a fresher tree.

"I think delivering a fresher tree may have the advantage of holding the needles better, but it may have the disadvantage of not being as aromatic when we put it in our homes," John said.

His advice: Cut a few boughs and keep them on the mantle, where they'll get nice and dry. And wonderfully smelly. ■