



A publication of Fairfax County, Virginia



## CODE COMPLIANCE GUIDELINE

# DECORATIVE VEGETATION

INCLUDING NATURAL CUT HOLIDAY TREES INSIDE BUILDINGS

### Office of the Fire Marshal Fire Inspections Branch

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This publication outlines the *Virginia Statewide Fire Prevention Code* (i.e., Fire Prevention Code or SFPC) fire safety requirements and prohibitions related to the display of natural and artificial decorative vegetation inside new and existing buildings located in Fairfax County and the towns of Clifton, Herndon, and Vienna. This publication does not address decorative materials and furnishings, nor does it address interior finish changes in existing buildings.

Questions regarding the content of this publication should be directed to the Fire Inspections Branch at 703-246-4849 during regular office hours, Monday thru Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

## OVERVIEW

Natural cut trees and natural vegetation located inside buildings can pose a fire hazard when not safely displayed and/or when not properly prepared or cared for. Section 806 of the Fire Prevention Code regulates the display of both natural and artificial decorative vegetation inside new and existing buildings. Although the majority of the Section 806 deals specifically with natural cut trees, such as Christmas or holiday trees, the section also addresses natural vegetation such as batting, cloth, cotton, hay, stalks, straw, vines, leaves, trees, moss, and similar items posing a flammability hazard.

In addition to natural cut trees and natural vegetation, fire safety requirements and prohibitions related to artificial decorative vegetation, associated electrical equipment and wiring, and the requirements for the removal of decorative vegetation from buildings are also addressed.

## NATURAL CUT TREES

**Restricted Occupancies.** Section 806.1.1 of the Fire Prevention Code prohibits natural cut trees in Group A, E, I-1, I-2, I-3, I-4, M, R-1, R-2 and R-4 occupancies.

### *Exceptions:*

1. Trees located in areas protected by an approved automatic sprinkler system installed in accordance with NFPA 13 or NFPA 13R shall not be prohibited in Groups A, E, M, R-1 and R-2. However, if the automatic sprinkler system is not properly maintained or is out-of-service, this exception may not apply.
2. Trees shall be allowed within dwelling units in Group R-2 occupancies.
3. Trees shall be permitted in places of worship in Group A occupancies.

**Notice:** In all occupancies, natural cut trees must be prepared and maintained in accordance with the Fire Prevention Code. See page two for detailed code requirements.

For more information about the above referenced occupancy classifications (i.e., Group A, E,

I-1, R-2, etc.) and related terms, please refer to Chapter 2 of the Fire Prevention Code.

**Preparation & Maintenance of Natural Cut Trees.** Building owners and business operators are reminded to ensure that natural cut trees, where permitted, be properly prepared and adequately maintained in accordance with the following Fire Prevention Code requirements:

- **Fresh Trunk Cut.** Natural cut trees shall have the trunk bottoms cut off at least one-half inch above the original cut before being placed in a support device. If you cannot immediately place the tree into a support device after making this cut, place the freshly cut trunk into a bucket of water. A fresh tree may take up three or more quarts of water a day for the first few days after it is initially placed in water, so check the water supply several times a day for the first few days to ensure an adequate water supply is maintained. (806.1)
- **Support Device.** The support device that holds the tree in an upright position shall be of a type that is stable and that meets all of the following criteria: (806.1.2)
  1. Shall hold the tree securely and be of adequate size to avoid tipping over of the tree.
  2. Shall be capable of containing a minimum two-day supply of water.
  3. The water level, when full, shall cover the tree stem at least two inches.
- **Daily Checks.** The water level shall be checked at least once daily and maintained above the fresh cut at all times. The tree shall also be checked daily for dryness. Indications of dryness are whenever the needles or leaves fall off readily when a tree branch is shaken or if the needles are brittle and break when bent between the thumb and index finger. (806.1.2 & 806.1.3)
- **Candles & Open Flames Prohibited.** Candles and open flames, where not prohibited by the SFPC, shall not be used on or near decorative vegetation including natural cut trees. Candles shall be prohibited in an aisles/exits and in areas where occupants stand. (806.4 & 308.1.7.1)
- **Heat Source Separation Required.** Natural cut trees shall be kept a safe distance from sources of heat including ceiling, wall, or floor forced-air heat vents, radiators, and open flame or heat-producing devices at least equal to the height of the tree to prevent the accelerated drying of the tree. (806.4)

## **NATURAL VEGETATION & LIVE TREES**

**General Limitations & Prohibitions.** In accordance with Section 806.6 of the Fire Prevention Code (as amended by Fairfax County) flammable natural vegetation materials such as batting, cloth, cotton, hay, stalks, straw, vines, leaves, trees, moss, and similar items shall not be used for decorative purposes in show windows, building lobbies, exits, exit access, or other parts of buildings, or any area of public use in such a quantity as to constitute a fire hazard.

**Restricted Occupancies.** In accordance with Section 806.6.1 of the Fire Prevention Code (as amended by Fairfax County) flammable natural vegetation materials such as batting, cloth, cotton, hay, stalks, straw, vines, leaves, trees, moss, and similar items shall be prohibited in Group A, E, I-1, I-2, I-3, I-4, M, R-1, R-2, and R-4 occupancies.

*Exception:*

These items may be located in areas protected by an approved automatic sprinkler system installed in accordance with NFPA 13 or NFPA 13R shall not be prohibited in Groups A, E, M, R-1, and R-2. However, if the automatic sprinkler system is not properly maintained or is out-of-service, this exception may not apply.

For more information about the above referenced occupancy classifications (i.e., Group A, E,

I-1, R-2, etc.) and related terms, please refer to Chapter 2 of the Fire Prevention Code.

## **ARTIFICIAL VEGETATION**

Section 806.2 of the Fire Prevention Code requires that artificial decorative vegetation meet the flame propagation performance criteria of NFPA 701. Meeting the flame propagation performance criteria of NFPA 701 shall be documented and certified by the manufacturer in an approved manner.

## **REMOVAL OF DECORATIVE VEGETATION**

- **Dryness of Natural Cut Trees.** Natural cut trees shall be removed from the building whenever the needles or leaves fall off readily when a tree branch is shaken or if the needles are brittle and break when bent between the thumb and index finger. Any natural cut tree found meeting this dryness criteria shall be immediately removed from the building. (806.1.3)
- **Obstruction of Means of Egress.** When decorative vegetation is located in any portion of the means of egress, the vegetation or tree shall be immediately removed from the means of egress to a safe and appropriate location. (806.3 & 1030.2)
- **Inside Restricted Occupancies.** When decorative vegetation including natural cut trees, live trees, or natural vegetation is found in a restricted occupancy, or portion thereof, where prohibited by the Fire Prevention Code, the decorative vegetation shall be removed from the occupancy immediately. (806.1.1 & 806.6.1)

## **RESPONSIBILITY**

- **Owner Responsibility.** In accordance with Section 110.2 of the Fire Prevention Code, the owner is responsible for the safe and proper maintenance of any structure or premises. In all structures the fire protection equipment, means of egress, alarms, devices and safeguards shall be maintained in a safe and proper operating condition.
- **Occupant Responsibility.** In accordance with Section 110.3 of the Fire Prevention Code, when a building occupant creates conditions in violation of the Fire Prevention Code, by virtue of storage and use of substances, materials, devices, and appliances, such occupant shall be held responsible for the abatement of said hazardous conditions.

## **EMERGENCY EXITS**

The display, storage, and use of decorative vegetation, where permitted, shall not compromise any emergency exit or element of the means of egress, and shall comply with the following:

- **Means of Egress Reliability.** Required exit accesses, exits or exit discharges shall be continuously maintained free from obstructions or impediments to full instant use in the case of fire or other emergency when the areas served by such exits are occupied. (1030.2)
- **Width of Exits Shall be Maintained Clear.** The required width of any portion of a means of egress shall not be obstructed by decorative vegetation. (806.3)
- **Vegetation Prohibited in Exits.** Combustible materials, including decorative vegetation, shall not be stored or displayed in exits or exit enclosures. (315.2.2)

- **Vegetation Shall Not Obstruct Exits.** Furnishings, decorations or other objects shall not be placed so as to obstruct exits, access thereto, egress therefrom, or visibility thereof. (1030.6)

## **ELECTRICAL WIRING & LIGHTING**

Inspect all listed electrical devices, lights, and wiring for frayed or cracked wiring, broken plugs, and defective sockets before use. Do not use damaged or modified electrical equipment or wiring, and always consider the following Fire Prevention Code requirements and prohibitions:

- **Multiplug Adapters.** Multiplug adapters, such as cube adapters, unfused plug strips or any other device not complying with NFPA 70 shall be prohibited. Relocatable power taps shall be of the polarized or grounded type, equipped with overcurrent protection, and shall be listed in accordance with UL 1363. Relocatable power taps shall be directly connected to a permanently installed receptacle and shall not extend through walls, ceilings, floors, under doors or floor coverings, or be subject to environmental or physical damage. (605.4)
- **Extension Cords.** Extension cords and flexible cords shall not be a substitute for permanent wiring. Extension cords and flexible cords shall not be affixed to structures, extended through walls, ceilings or floors, or under doors or floor coverings, nor shall such cords be subject to environmental damage or physical impact. (605.5)
- **Hazardous Wiring Prohibited.** The use of electrical wiring, devices, appliances and other equipment that is modified or damaged and constitutes an electrical shock or fire hazard shall be prohibited. Open junction boxes and open-wiring splices in electrical circuits and wiring shall be prohibited. (605.1 & 605.6)
- **Lights & Wiring shall be Listed.** The use of unlisted electrical wiring and lighting on natural cut trees and artificial decorative vegetation shall be prohibited. Electrical wiring and lighting shall be listed. The term "Listed" means equipment or materials included on a list published by an approved testing laboratory, inspection agency or other organization concerned with product safety evaluation and testing, such as Underwriters Laboratory (UL). (806.5)
- **Electrical Wiring and Lighting on Metal Trees Prohibited.** The use of electrical wiring and lighting on artificial trees constructed entirely of metal shall be prohibited. (806.5)

## **LEARN MORE, SEE A VIDEO**

Once a natural cut tree is deprived of water for a day or so, an accelerated drying process begins within the tree and first effects the needles. Properly maintaining a natural cut tree is important to retaining high moisture content in the needles of the tree, which can limit accidental ignition and prevent rapid flame spread. A tree which has dry needles can readily ignite.

The U.S. Fire Administration reminds us that special fire safety precautions need to be taken when keeping a live or natural cut tree inside a building, and that a burning tree can rapidly fill a room with fire and deadly gases. For more information about natural cut tree (Christmas tree) hazards, including a video segment demonstrating how fast a live Christmas tree can become fully engulfed in flames, check out the U.S. Fire Administration's "Holiday and Christmas Tree Fire Safety" online at:

[www.usfa.dhs.gov/citizens/home\\_fire\\_prev/holiday-seasonal/treefire.shtm](http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/citizens/home_fire_prev/holiday-seasonal/treefire.shtm)

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