If you are superstitious, you will know that you supposedly need to take down your Christmas decorations tonight – the Twelfth Night – to avoid bad luck. But what is the best thing to do with our Christmas trees? Do we recycle them or just throw them away?

Nobody wants to be a Grinch or a Scrooge, but there is an inevitable seasonal increase in carbon dioxide emissions from the disposal of trees. It is possible, however, to reduce our carbon footprint by thinking about what we do with our Christmas trees.

It is commonly thought that real Christmas trees are better for the environment than artificial trees. Real trees can be decomposed into compost and be recycled or turned into wood chippings. All local authorities will provide some form of recycling service for Christmas trees. But it’s estimated that 160,000 tonnes of them are either fly-tipped or end up in landfill. Local authorities may be paying up to £12.5m in landfill taxes – a lot of money that could be better spent improving recycling and other council services.

A real Christmas tree that is sent to a landfill has a carbon footprint of about 16kg. As it decomposes, it produces methane. But an artificial tree produces more than twice the greenhouse-gas emissions than that of a real tree that goes to a landfill and more than 10 times that of a real tree that is incinerated. An artificial tree is also thought to have a higher initial carbon footprint because it is made of plastic, which comes from oil.

Recycling, landfills and incineration are not the be-all and end-all of waste management. According to the waste hierarchy, which forms the basis of EU and UK waste policy, reuse and prevention should be higher priorities.

While artificial Christmas trees cannot be recycled, they can be stored away in January and reused year after year. Real trees cannot generally be used more than once. If you can hold onto an artificial Christmas tree for at least 10 years, it becomes the greener option. In other words, using one artificial tree for 10 years produces the same amount of carbon emissions as buying a new real tree every year for 10 years.

As evergreens, real Christmas trees can be reused if they still have their roots. As well as being replanted in gardens, they can shore up flood defences or offset carbon emissions. But they do that anyway without being chopped down for Christmas. Real Christmas trees may be a minority taste anyway. Between six million and eight million real trees are sold every year in the UK. But according to research carried out in 2012 by the consumer group Which?, only 20 per cent of households were planning to buy real trees, with 60 per cent of households opting for artificial trees. However, the falling pound may have since given British Christmas tree growers a boost over artificial tree manufacturers.

Dr Pravin Jeyaraj is a fellow at the University of Westminster’s Law and Theory Lab

What’s the best way to dispose of a Christmas tree, and are modern, artificial specimens more environment-friendly? By Pravin Jeyaraj

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