

How To Dress Your Russian Holiday Tree

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

Ёлка: holiday tree

It's beginning to look a lot like the holidays in the Russian capital: fresh snow in the morning, street decorations lighting up at night, and horrendous traffic jams 24/7. It sounds like the holidays, too: that lovely скрип-скрип-скрип (scrape, scrape, scrape) of the courtyard cleaners shoveling snow in the morning, the familiar piped-in Christmas music in the malls, and — увы! (alas!) — the rat-a-tat-tats of петарды (fireworks) that make you drop the tray of cookies you're pulling out of the oven and send pets flying under the bed.

Since there are a lot of first-timers in Russia trying to maintain their national and family traditions while still struggling with Cyrillic, I thought I'd provide a little holiday primer.

First of all, you need a tree. In Russian, this is ёлка or ёлочка (a holiday tree), which are rather endearing forms of the word ель (fir) — what most of them are. You can, however, find сосна (pine), if you like that kind of tree. Trees are sold in some big box stores starting at the end of November and at ёлочные базары (tree fairs), which usually open around Dec. 20 — just in time for Christmas, but late enough to fray nerves and worry children.

The Christmas celebrated on Dec. 25 is commonly called католическое Рождество (Catholic Christmas), and don't even think about pointing out that you are Protestant or Боже упаси! (God forbid!) Greek Orthodox. Just let it go. Otherwise you'll be discussing it until Easter. In any case, your neighbors put their tree up for New Year's, hence it's called новогодняя ёлка (New Year's tree), which now comes before Рождество Христово (Christmas), celebrated in the Russian Orthodox Church on Jan. 7.

You can also just forget about a real tree — and the agony of fir needles in every nook and cranny of your apartment (and body) until June — and get искусственная ёлка (an artificial tree). In either case you will need подставка для ёлки (tree stand). If you are a grammar lover buying a tree stand, you'll be delighted to know that you can also ask for подставка под новогоднюю ель (stand to put under the Christmas tree).

And then the fun begins. To decorate your tree, you can use two verb pairs: украшать/украсить (to decorate) or наряжать/нарядить (to dress up). I prefer the second one, just because I love the idea of the naked tree standing in the corner, waiting to be dressed in finery.

To dress up your tree, you need гирлянды — a word I personally loathe for two reasons: 1) I can never remember how to spell it since it was borrowed from the Italian guirlanda and not the English garland; and 2) it doesn't mean any kind of garland but specifically strings of lights. The fuzzy kind of garland is called мишура. To describe what you do with them, use the verb pair обматывать/обмотать (to encircle, wrap around).

As you know, in every family there is the Tree Decorating Expert, and if you are the designated — usually self-designated — only person in the room who knows how to properly decorate a tree, you say: Одной гирляндой обмотай ствол дерева, а другую расположи на ветвях (Wind one string of lights around the tree trunk and put the other on the boughs.)

After you supervise the arrangement of the lights, and they are tested and found satisfactory, you pull out the boxes of decorations. In Russian, all the stuff you heap on the tree is called, collectively рождественские or новогодние or ёлочные украшения (Christmas, New Year's or tree decorations), but the ornaments are usually called игрушки (literally "toys") or шары (balls). Here the verb pair is вешать/повесить (to hang). The tree supervisor should say (after loud throat clearing, hands on hips): Ребята, вешайте игрушки в правильном порядке! (Hang the ornaments in the right order!) Крупные игрушки на низких ветках! (The big ornaments go on the lower boughs!)

When all the ornaments are on the tree and meet your approval, you can pull out the finishing touches: бусы (strings of beads); блестящая мишура (metallic garland); дождик (tinsel); серпантины (ribbons); блёстки (glitter); and конфетки (candies). Here you can spread your arms wide and say: Раскидайте их по ёлке! (Toss them on the tree!) And then clarify: Не так! Равномерно! (Not like that! Spread them all over evenly.)

At this point you will have a beautifully decorated tree and a family ready to punch you. That's when you say: А кто хочет выпить? (So who wants a drink?)

But before you head into the kitchen, there is one more magic phrase, without which your holiday tree will be ruined: Закрой дверь и не впускай кота! (Close the door and don't let the cat in!)

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

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