

# Diggin' in the Dirt: Oregon's Christmas Tree Industry

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## Master Gardener™ class signups being taken

The OSU Extension office in Columbia County will be offering the Master Gardener™ training again in St. Helens this spring. The classes will be held on Mondays from 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM for 11 weeks starting on January 7th, 2013. Cost of the program is \$75.00 which includes a large resource book. Master Gardeners are responsible for providing volunteer gardening education to the community as partial payback for the training. If interested in the program, call the Extension office at 503 397-3462 for an information packet.

## Growth of the Oregon Christmas tree industry

For many years, Oregonians cut their own Christmas trees from federal or state lands or purchased them from rural landowners who harvested the best looking wild trees and sold them in Portland and other urban areas. My family went to a farm near Suver to harvest a wild tree from the farm of a family friend. But forests matured and harvesters had to go further and further to find nice trees. Some small woodland owners began to grow trees specifically for sale as Christmas trees. These trees were planted at a tighter density (more trees per acre). Douglas fir was the most commonly grown but other trees, including Scot's pine, were part of the mix. There was little pruning or other cultural measures taken to produce the denser trees we have today. But that too changed. A shorn tree has firmer branches for ornaments and the fuller look was pleasing to customers.

The Extension Service got involved very early in assisting the nascent Christmas tree industry. They tested species for important characteristics like needle retention (not much fun to bring a tree into a house and have it lose all its needles), color, shearing techniques, disease and insect management, growth requirements,

and other cultural practices. My predecessor, Don Coin Walrod, was an important early figure in the industry and helped a number of the first Columbia County Christmas tree farms get a start. Chal Landgren, who joined our office in 1979, focused a significant portion of his work on the Christmas tree industry and is now the statewide specialist for Christmas tree cultivation, based out of the OSU North Willamette Research and Extension Center in Aurora. He still has a small Christmas tree farm in Warren.

The Pacific Northwest (and especially, Oregon) Christmas tree acreage expanded rapidly from its small early base in the 1950s. The quality of our Northwest trees made our growers very competitive in markets accustomed to trees from the upper Midwest and other states. New species were tried and older choices were abandoned. Douglas fir remained the main species for many years but Noble and Grand fir trees became established as important species in our Christmas tree mix. Scots pines were largely abandoned in this region. In recent years a couple of new species, Nordmann and Fraser firs have gotten more attention.

As national markets expanded, there has been a lot of effort to find species, strains, and handling techniques to improve needle color and retention. A large program started to make genetic improvement in the various species through wild tree selection and testing followed by propagation by cuttings and controlled seed crosses to select for improved planting stock.

Trees from Oregon are now routinely shipped to all fifty states, Mexico, South America, Hawaii, the Far East, the Near East and many other locations around the world. Handling techniques were perfected to ensure a good quality tree upon arrival and after sale. Tree bundling equipment was invented to allow more trees to be packed into containers or on trucks.

Oregon is still the largest producer of Christmas trees in the U.S. Acreage has fallen somewhat in recent years. This has been due to several factors. First, too many trees were planted in the early 2000s

and there has been a glut of trees ready for market. Second, the recession has trimmed discretionary expenditures. Finally, the quality of artificial trees has improved and people who buy one tend not to return to a cut Christmas tree. That has tended to hold down Christmas tree prices for the last four years or so. That is good news for the consumer who wants a great locally grown tree. And for many people, there is nothing to compare with the smell and feel of a real Christmas tree.

If you cut your own tree from a Christmas tree farm, get the fresh cut end in

a Christmas tree stand with a deep water well as soon as possible if you are bringing it straight inside. The tree will take up a lot of water the first week or so, then slowly slow its water uptake. If you buy your tree from a lot or don't plan to put your fresh cut tree in the house for several days, make a new one-inch cut on the base just before you bring it in and then follow the procedure above. Keep water in the tree well at all times and avoid placing the tree near a wood stove or other very dry location in the house.

*The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.*

## Free newsletter

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called County Living) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed to you. Call 503 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> and click on newsletters.

**Contact information for the Extension office:**  
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**Where Do  
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The Voice?**

Tobie Finzel of Vernonia visited Haverhill, Massachusetts where she stopped by a statue of her ancestor Hannah Dustin/Duston/Dustan (no historical consistency in spelling) Hannah is a many-times-great-grandmother to both Finzel and Vernonian Dan Brown. Hannah was captured by a band of Abenaki Indians in the frontier town of Haverhill, in 1697 and later bravely escaped. The statue in the Haverhill park was the first erected to a woman in the US in 1867.

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