

# Why your future Christmas tree might be hard to find

A tree seedling shortage spread across the West

By ANNA KING  
Northwest News Network

You might be in the market for a Christmas tree right about now, but have you thought about what type of Christmas tree you want in eight years?

Believe it or not, it might be hard to find one by then. That's because of a tree seedling shortage happening right now across the West.

The repercussions are being felt across the region, including by Darryl Smith, the owner of S&S Evergreen U-Cut. He estimates he'll sell about 200 Douglas firs and Noble firs in the next couple of weeks. He's just not sure how he's going to find 200 replacement seedlings for a Christmas eight years down the road.

"Right now, all you can do in this business is keep plugging along," Smith said. "I don't want to just give up. I got enough trees to get me by for a couple more years or so and then hopefully we'll have the seedling issue back under control."

Smith said he ordered his seedlings from his nursery a year in advance, but the operation said they might not have as many, or any young trees for him this year.

"Last year was the first year I had any problem," Smith said. "And sounds like this year is going to be a problem too."

It's a common story this year in Washington state, Oregon, California and beyond. There aren't enough baby trees to plant back what people want to cut down or what has burned in recent wildfires. It's a seedling shortage.

**A dearth of seedlings**

There are many reasons for the shortage: For one, weather. There have been two years of summer drought and an exceptionally wet spring this year



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There is a tree seedling shortage across the West that could complicate future Christmas tree sales.

that killed a lot of seedlings. Timber managers are having to replant areas with young trees that were already planted because of the high mortality.

During the economic downturn, a few major Northwest seedling nurseries went out of business. Now, with the economy improving, demand is up on an already tightened

supply. More people can afford fresh Christmas trees and more lumber is being cut for building. And with severe wildfires across the West, all those burnt areas need replanting as well.

The seedling shortage appears to be nationwide, although it's more acute in states like in Washington and Oregon. That's according to

Diane Haase, the head seedling nursery expert for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service in the West and Pacific islands.

Haase said she's seeing this seedling shortage in the more than dozen states and additional territories she covers.

"All the nurseries are growing at capacity and there's just only so many that they can produce each year," she said. "So everyone is in the same boat."

Making the shortage worse is the fact that many state-run tree nurseries have been shuttered. They used to grow seedlings for small landowners or people wanting smaller batches of trees, like 100 to 1,000, that are harder to get from commercial growers.

Haase said California is even planning to reopen a government-run seedling nursery that had been closed, to try and alleviate some of the pressures on small landowners and forest-fire scarred areas.

Smaller buyers can also go to an online marketplace called "Forest Seedling Network" where people post seedlings for sale and where small buyers can band together to buy larger lots.

According to Bob McNitt, who runs the network, the site has been quiet lately. Very few people are posting seedlings for sale.

During the Great Recession, many nurseries plowed under seedlings that they couldn't sell, and they cut back the number of seedlings in their inventories. So now, there are very few uncontracted trees on the open market.

At the annual public Weyerhaeuser nursery sale in Aurora, hundreds of people lined up hours in advance of the 8 a.m. opening last year. It looked like a rock concert.

When the doors opened, customers dove in for the few

hundred small trees available. They sold out within hours, according to Mark Triebwasser, the nursery manager.

Usually, that giant nursery has two sales per year, but it's already canceled its second one planned for later in 2018, because of the dearth of extra seedlings. Since there has been a major uptick in logging, Weyerhaeuser and other major timber companies are keeping more of their seedlings for their own use.

Mike Gerdes owns Silvasseed Company in the small city of Roy, Washington, outside Tacoma. It's a major supplier of evergreen seed and seedlings worldwide.

Much of their valuable Northwest seed goes to European timber operations. But this year, some of his customers will be disappointed.

"There are people that just aren't going to get what they need," Gerdes said.



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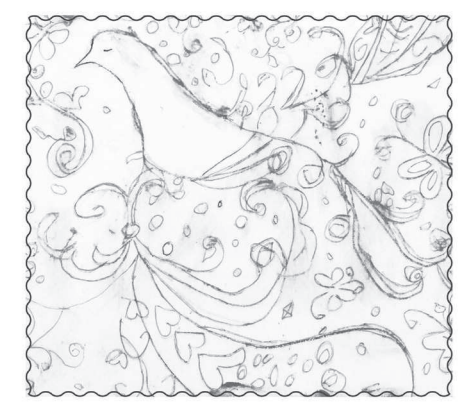
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