

Christmas tree growers poised for busy season

By JAMIE HALE
The Oregonian

Christmas tree growers in Oregon are preparing for a busy holiday season, as people look for a brighter ending to a particularly difficult year.

Last year's recession-hindered fields yielded fewer trees leading to a dwindling supply come the holidays, but this year is already looking promising for local Christmas tree farms, which anticipate a busy season ahead.

Tom Norby, president of the Oregon Christmas Tree Growers Association and owner of the Trout Creek Tree Farm in Corbett, said that while the Christmas tree inventory might still be a little tight for 2020 (especially for trees more than 7 feet tall), he didn't expect there would be any serious shortages — even after considering that more people than usual may be looking to buy trees.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic will undoubtedly force more Oregonians to avoid traveling for the holidays, which could lead to more people setting up their own trees at home. Cheery Christmas decorations are also a way to brighten up what has otherwise been a grim 2020.

"People, with this weird year that we've had, they're just looking for something a little normal," Norby said.

Many local farms have reported a rush of early business this year, he said, indicating that Oregonians are eager to get their holiday decorations up early.

Alison Bruns, owner of the Misty Ridge Tree Farm in Oregon City, said she opened her field early for U-cut this year after people started asking for trees a week before Thanksgiving. Her wholesale customers picked up their orders early as well.

But with the coronavirus pandemic still dangling overhead, a certain amount of uncertainty remains, she said. An outbreak traced back to a U-cut farm, for example, could be devastating to local farms, which has led to farms to take precautions like limiting crowd sizes and making one-way paths through their lots.

"It's a little scary not knowing what's going to happen," Bruns said. "We only have this one chance per year to make this money."

While some farms have opted against opening for U-cut this year, the majority are seeing it as a safe holiday tradition, Norby said — and an opportunity to turn a profit.

Chal Lundgren, a Christmas tree specialist at Oregon State University, said prices for trees typically increased every year, with average prices more than doubling from \$36.50 in 2008 to \$78 in 2018. Due



Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

A worker unties a bundle of Christmas trees at a farm in Estacada in 2018.

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Tom Norby | president of the Oregon Christmas Tree Growers Association and owner of the Trout Creek Tree Farm in Corbett

to a supply shortage in 2019, he said, prices increased more than usual, and this year, another modest price bump is expected.

"It's very supply and demand oriented," Lundgren said. "If demand stays the same, you would expect prices to go up, certainly not go down."

Last year's price increase was a boon for big-time producers like McKenzie Farms, one of Oregon's largest Christmas tree empires, which said it made a record profit in 2019. Unlike local farms that sell to individuals and small businesses, McKenzie Farms ships trees to big box stores around the country, harvesting 800,000 to 1 million trees each year from its 198 fields planted

between Estacada and Monroe.

McKenzie "Ken" Cook, chairman and former owner of McKenzie Farms, said profits this year will be partially offset by the additional costs of labor and shipping, which he says have increased due to the pandemic.

"It won't be as good as last year, but it will be a profitable year for the growers," Cook said. "The demand is certainly ahead of last year."

The most in-demand trees tend to be noble firs and Nordmann firs, which are harder than other species like the Douglas fir, and can last inside a home for several months. Oregon farms harvest those trees by the millions, but as they look to plant the

next generation for harvest a decade from now, they may be competing for seedlings with Oregon foresters looking to replant forests destroyed by wildfires, Lundgren said.

That's one of a myriad concerns that Christmas tree growers face as the climate continues to warm.

Hot summers put stress on the trees, which shed needles in response. Unstable weather patterns can also be problematic, as dense fog and heavy rains can hinder harvests come fall.

And then there's the wildfires themselves, which this year came perilously close to many tree farms. Norby said he only heard of one farm that burned, and another field that was partially scorched.

Any year that turns out profitable is a good one, he said, as any long-term concerns are balanced out by a steady demand for Christmas trees each fall.

"All you can do is just hope for the best," Norby said. "It's a gamble, but we're gambling all the time. We're farmers, that's what we do."

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