

The other Christmas crops



From poinsettias to holly, unique plants provide a niche market for Northwest farmers, nurseries

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Ten years ago, the market for the Northwest’s signature Christmas tree crop was depressed by an over-supply, sending prices into the gutter. The Hupp family, which farms near Silverton had an abundance of fully-grown trees that nobody had bought, so they decided to get rid of them.

But not all of them. After removing roughly every other tree in some of their fields, the Hupps allowed the remaining Noble firs to develop longer, wider and thicker branches, which were then cut and sold for boughs used in Christmas decorations. “A lot of it is spacing,” said Jason Hupp, whose family owns Hupp Farms.

These days, wreaths, garlands and boughs are a steady business line for the Hupps, who also continue to grow Christmas trees and nursery seedlings.

A major advantage of the bough market is that large buyers send their own crews to harvest the crop.

“We don’t have the manpower to cut everything people want,” Hupp said. “The nice thing is we don’t have to harvest it.”

Boughs also play a useful role given the varying conditions across the Hupps’ property.

Their best fields with access to irrigation water are devoted to nursery conifers. Marginal land without water is planted to Christmas trees. Steep and less accessible parcels are dedicated to boughs. Rocky fields are committed to timber.

Across the U.S., farmers sold more than \$1.3 million worth of cut coniferous evergreens in 2014, according to the most recent USDA data. To compare, the total value of cut Christmas trees — the king of the holiday’s crops — topped \$366 million that year.

Despite the relatively small market for boughs and Christmas-related plants such as poinsettias and holly, they provide an important niche for Northwest growers, tapping a source of cash flow at a time of year when most other crops have long been harvested.

Christmas color

Poinsettias provide a way for greenhouse nurseries that sell flowering bedding plants in springtime to keep their employees busy during the fall, too.

Last year, growers nationwide sold nearly \$140 million worth of potted poinsettias, according to USDA.

Though the plant isn’t particularly profitable, it does provide enough revenue to keep workers who might not otherwise return from being laid off, said Vern Johnson, owner of Johnson Brothers Greenhouses near Eugene, Ore.

Because they’re a tropical plant, poinsettias need more heat during the cool months preceding Christmas, adding to the cost of growing them,



Don Harteloo, owner of Mill Creek Holly Farms near Stayton, examines holly growing on his property.



Christmas cactuses are grown at Fessler Nursery near Woodburn. The plants must be covered part of each day to make them flower.

he said.

They’re also prone to fungal disease, requiring frequent sprays and more spacing between plants to ensure proper air circulation.

“It’s not a bread-and-butter crop,” said Johnson, who also produces bedding plants, perennials, shrubs and trees.

International crop

Poinsettias are a truly international industry, he said.

Breeding occurs in tropical countries such as Costa Rica and Guatemala. Cuttings are then shipped to large greenhouses, where they’re rooted. The rooted poinsettias are then sold to greenhouses such as the Johnson Brothers operation for the final stage of production.

Night temperatures must be kept above 65 degrees Fahrenheit for poinsettias, though breeders in recent years have turned their attention to developing varieties that can withstand lower temperatures, Johnson said.

“We’re loving that, because

a lot of your money goes to heating these things,” he said.

Improved genetics in poinsettias have also reduced the need to screen many varieties from the sun to induce flowering, said Kyle Peterson, production manager at Fessler Nursery near Woodburn.

Within the greenhouse, wires are suspended above the crop, which is manually covered in plastic each day and uncovered in the morning.

“It’s quite a chore pulling that plastic each day,” he said.

While fewer poinsettia varieties now require this treatment, Fessler

Nursery has in recent years also begun growing Christmas cactuses, which must be covered from 4 p.m. to 8 a.m. beginning in September to initiate flowering, he said.

Despite the extra labor, Christmas cactuses are more profitable because they’re not as sensitive to cold and prone to diseases as poinsettias, Peterson said.

“They require a lot of attention,” he said.

The nursery has dispatched an efficient remedy to combat the white flies, aphids and thrips that feast on poinsettias: Baskets of mullein — a common roadside plant with leathery leaves — are hung throughout the greenhouse.

The mullein harbors a beneficial bug, dicyphus hesperus, which eats the pests, Peterson said. “We’re always trying to find additional ways to reduce pesticide use.”

Holly threats

While poinsettias are finicky due to their tropical origins, farmers also encounter difficulties with a Christmas crop that naturally thrives in the region — holly.

The plant is vulnerable to phytophthora, a genus of fungal-like pathogens that damage it.



Kyle Peterson, production manager at Fessler Nursery near Woodburn shows off a large poinsettia.

“There’s no cure for it. All you can do is try to prevent it,” said Don Harteloo, who owns Mill Creek Holly Farms near Stayton.

More than \$1 million worth of cut holly was sold in the U.S. in 2014, according to the latest USDA data.

Fungicide sprays are necessary during the rainy season, and during summer dead leaves and other debris are vacuumed from beneath the holly trees to keep the disease away.

Unless a grower is aggressive in fighting the pathogen, it can defoliate and wipe out an entire orchard, especially in a year like 2016, when disease pressure has been high, said Harteloo.

“It seems to be getting worse all the time, and this seems to be a particularly bad year,” he said.

Once a healthy holly tree is established, which takes about a decade, branches can be cut vigorously each year, Harteloo said.

Cutting seems to stimulate growth, so overly zealous harvesters have never been a problem, he said.

Harteloo and his wife, Sue, sell their holly to wholesale buyers. They also make wreaths and other decorations, which are sold online.

Most buyers want red berries on their holly and prefer variegated cultivars with leaves that have cream-colored edges, Sue Harteloo said.

To prevent leaves and berries from falling off after harvest, the branches are dipped in a rare plant hormone, Don Harteloo said.

“It’s very expensive. A thousand dollars a gallon,” he said.

Harvest by shotgun

The Harteloos also sell “kissing balls” that incorporate mistletoe, a parasitic plant that infects oak trees.

A farmer near Silverton has enough mistletoe growing wild on his property to supply their yearly needs.

“It doesn’t take much to go a long ways,” Harteloo said.

The mistletoe is collected using ladders or shears on long poles, but when it’s particularly inaccessible, Harteloo resorts to firearms.

“You can shoot it down, usually with a shotgun,” he said.



Christmas trees grow at Hupp Farms near Silverton. The Hupp family grows nursery conifer seedlings, Christmas trees, boughs and timber.

Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press