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COVID-19 driving live Christmas tree sales this year

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By Chris Drost

Restrictions in place because of COVID-19 mean that this holiday season, families are having to stay closer to home. By all reports, this factor, combined with an overall shortage of trees, has created an unprecedented year for the sale of live Christmas trees.

Back in 2008 when the global recession took place, many Christmas tree growers did not plant as many seedlings as they normally would. Those trees would be just about ready for cutting in 2020 as it takes about 10 to 12 years or more to grow the average Christmas tree, depending on species. Hence the shortage.

Reports of a tree shortage in mainstream media seem to have produced early demand for the trees amid fears that families could be left without a Christmas tree.

Shirley Brennan, the executive director of Christmas Tree Farmers of Ontario, says, ?There has been a massive increase in sales, partly because of COVID-19 but also there has been a general increase in live Christmas tree sales in each of the last eight years. The value of the Christmas tree industry was $55 million in 2013 and it is now $100 million,? says Brennan. The forecast for this year was for sales to increase again but then COVID-19 hit and sales greatly increased.

Brennan says that half of the trees cut in Canada each year are exported to the U.S., a total of $49 million in value. In 2019 2.2 million Christmas trees were exported.

In speaking with Christmas tree growers and retailers, Brennan has heard that a lot of new people who never had a real tree before are buying one this year. She says there are also a lot of homes in new subdivisions in Ontario and those people are buying trees to start a new tradition. Secondly, the fact that some jurisdictions have banned single use plastics and the younger generation (40 and under) have a preference for buying natural products, has boosted sales. Brennan believes this factor has contributed to the steady growth in live tree sales in recent years. ?Also, people also want to get out together and bring the kids and feel normal and have hope,? she explained.

With limitations on traditional activities that families might do, such as go to the movies, shop at the mall or attend a live musical event, being able to go and cut a fresh Christmas tree at a tree farm, or even get one at the neighbourhood tree lot, is a special outing this year.

In Bancroft, the Knights of Columbus sold Christmas trees for the first time with considerable success. Stan Blank who previously owned Zehr's Meat and Delicatessen, used to sell trees in the area adjacent to his store. This year, Blank, also a member of the Knights of Columbus, offered the group the name of his tree contact and equipment so they could sell trees as a fundraiser. This after their usual soap box derby fundraiser, part of Wheels, Water and Wings, had to be cancelled. The Knights of Columbus raise funds for such causes as the foodbank, hospice, the local hospital, as well as local parishes.

Peter Penlington, who has been looking after the tree sales says they sold out of the trees very quickly. ?We sold out the first 25 in the first week and now have another 30 come in. From what Stan Blank tells us, this is ahead of previous years,? he said. One of the positives, according to Penlington, is that the trees have a small environmental footprint as they are sourced in the Madoc area.Jarrett Switzer, local tree grower whose family has sold Christmas trees in Belleville for more than 50 years, says the rush was on early this year and more people than ever are looking for a small tree. He thinks this is because many are seniors who will not be joining other family members this year and find a large tree a bit hard to handle.

Janet Martin of Denmar Christmas Tree Farm north of Belleville says it has been ?an exceptional year for us.? People came early

and she is getting a lot of calls from people who are worried about getting a tree after hearing on the news that there is a shortage. Fortunately, they are not short on trees. One thing that has surprised her is the number of customers who have moved to the area from the city. ?It has been a very good year,? she says.

While some question how environmentally friendly cutting a live tree can be, according to the Christmas Tree Farmers of Ontario website, ?Almost everywhere in North America and for sure in Ontario, Christmas trees are grown as a crop on tree farms. For every tree harvested, there are 10 more coming along, otherwise the farmer could not harvest each year.?

While Christmas trees will be inside for a few weeks at the most, the Canadian Christmas Tree Growers Association, an umbrella group of Canada's provincial Christmas tree associations, suggest that ?they can go right on giving long after the Christmas season is over as bird feeders, wood products for decorating your plant beds, keeping a piece to start next year's first holiday fire, or they can be used as wildlife cover in fish ponds and woodlots.?

With the volume of sales this year, municipalities that chip the trees into mulch after Christmas will have a lot of mulch they can use in green spaces.