



THE CAPITAL AND VANCOUVER ISLAND

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Hundreds of Christmas trees at Luxton Hall still looking for a home

PEDRO ARRAIS
Times Colonist

With just one day to go, a local, family-run Christmas tree retailer that usually sells out by the middle of December still has about 300 Christmas trees on its lot at Luxton Hall in Langford, despite concerns just a month ago about a shortage of trees.

The Happy Holidays Christmas Tree Company has been selling Christmas trees for seven years, bringing in about 900 trees from a family farm in the Skeena Valley each year.

This year, a third of the trees remain unsold, which means a \$20,000 to \$25,000 loss for entrepreneur Debbie Stroschein.

"It's been a rough ride," said Stroschein, who is also a teacher with the Sooke School District. "Business this year has been down 37 per cent, my first year it has decreased since I started."

"It is disheartening for me but it has also affected the crafters who sell their wares on site, some who have reported sales down 60 to 70 per cent. I cried a lot last week."

A portion of her sales is donated to the Juan De Fuca Search and Rescue, so a drop in sales means less funds for the rescue group as well.

Dustin Olender, partner Julie Holsworth and their son Henry Olender came by on Friday afternoon looking for a tree, preferably one about six feet tall.

"We had a change of plans and are now spending Christmas at home," said Olender. "I heard that the trees were going for \$30 and I wanted to support this business because they support Juan De Fuca Search and Rescue."

Stroschein said sales have dwindled at the same time that overhead costs have skyrocketed.

"Trucking, leasing fencing, renting tents and other costs were \$19,000 more than last year," she said. "That adds about \$10 to \$15 to every tree. I tried my best to keep the pricing as low as possible."

While she lost some business to box stores, her strength was that she could offer customers nine species of trees, including Noble, Nordman, Grand, Douglas and Amabilis firs, small jack pines, giant Western white pines and spruces. She had big ones, small ones, plump ones and ugly ones too. She even had hard-to-find alpine firs.

Just a month ago, concerns were raised about a tree shortage due to drought and forest fires, but that may have been confined to the larger commercial producers supplying big box stores, she suspects.

"The earlier reports could just have been fear mongering," she said.

She is ready to give the business, which she calls her passion project, one more year



Dustin Olender, left, holds his son, Henry, 2, with partner Julie Holsworth in the lot of the Happy Holidays Christmas Tree Company in Langford. The business was offering trees for \$30, regardless of species or size, in the days before Christmas. TIMES COLONIST

in hopes it will turn around.

"I can ride out the storm this year, but can we take a risk if it is a long-term shift in the market?"

While she plans to reopen next year, she said she will probably have to cut back on her staff of nine employees, some of whom rely on the income from seasonal work.

For some employees that she taught in alternate education programs, the jobs help get them on their feet and give them valuable life and employment skills, she said.

"They keep coming back every year."

The gates to the tree lot at 1040 Mar and Ave. are open, with the remaining trees available under an honour system. People are invited to pick out any tree for \$30 and e-transfer their payment to happyholidays@timescolonist.com.

"Some of those trees represent 15 years of pruning, fertilizing and care. That they could not find a home for Christmas after all that time is just sad."

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Winter storm causes supply problems at grocery stores and gas stations

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The winter storm sweeping across southern B.C. has created supply problems for local grocery stores and gas stations.

Robert Jay, vice-president of Fairway Markets, said some suppliers were proactive and sent groceries to Victoria Thursday night ahead of the freezing rain.

"They had their drivers spend the night in Victoria. Some knew they weren't going to be able to make the ferry today. That's part of life on the island," said Jay. "We were lucky to get some orders before the roads were closed."

Freezing rain closed roads and cancelled ferry sailings between Vancouver and Victoria, Nanaimo and the southern Gulf Islands.

The grocery chain gets much of its merchandise — poultry, meat, perishables, dry goods — from the mainland, said Jay.

"It's hit and miss. We'll reassess once we find out about road conditions and ferries and see how things are set up." He is hoping customers will be patient and if they can't find what they're looking for, find an alternative.

"If you can't find the turkey that you need for Christmas, maybe ham, maybe prime rib," he suggested.

Victoria just doesn't have the equipment to deal with winter storms, he said. "We're not really ready for it. And it's such a busy time and it adds even more stress."

Still, Jay said he knows people are looking out for each other. "Helping others is one of the things about the Christmas spirit. People helping others, assisting others, that's a great thing. It comes out and it shines."

Fairway Markets plans to close at 7 p.m. today to allow staff to spend time with family, and will reopen Boxing Day.

Meanwhile, some gas stations have run out of gas and have placed yellow tape around their pumps.

While the Esso station on Hillside Avenue has gas after getting a delivery on Thursday — delivery at nearby stations has been held up by the ice and snow, said the station manager.

The weather is also keeping plumbers busy.

"We've had lots of frozen pipes already and we're expecting a lot of calls now that it's started to thaw," said Wade Roberts of Wade Roberts Plumbing, emergency plumbing experts.

Pipes may have frozen and cracked, but the water might not leak until the ice thaws a bit, he said.

"It should be a bit of a crazy weekend, but we're hoping not, of course, because it's Christmas and we don't want to be working too hard," said Roberts, who has posted a link on his Facebook page with instructions on how to clear off street drains.

"That can be a big help. And if there are any drains on their property in front of their garage or their stairwell, [make] sure those things are open and free as it starts to rain, [so] it can flow into those drains," he said.

Roberts said some of his staff couldn't make it to work on Friday, but a couple of plumbers were out and about.

"It's tricky. Some of the side streets are tough to go on. We've put the word out to our whole team saying: 'If anybody wants to pick up shifts.' So we'll see. Hopefully, we'll be able to deal with as many of these issues as we can."

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Affirming message after tough few years

>FROM A1: KNOX

As cyclists go, they're pretty hard-core, but even they have limits. "The last week of November when we had the snow and the raging winds, most of us took three or four days off."

Not the plucky Central Saanich girl, though. "She rode every day," Szabo said. "That day with the high north winds, she rode right into it. Had to stop and regroup a few times but she never quit. Heart of a champion."

Szabo and his buddies figured someone showing that much gumption deserved a reward, maybe a good rebuild bike in her size. What they ended up getting, though (after receiving the blessing of the school district) was a good deal on a new seven-speed Norco from Brentwood Cycle. Pink, of course, because that's Ramsey Frombach's favourite colour. They also got her a pink helmet, a basket, lights ...

Ramsey had no idea this was coming. Last weekend, her mother, Kelsey, just told her that they were going to the Marigold Cafe, where a group of cyclists wanted to meet her. Szabo figured surprising Ramsey with her bike might make the riders happier than it would make Ramsey, though the girl herself probably disagrees. "It was awesome," Ramsey says.

Kelsey was pretty pumped, too. Having grown up on mountain and road bikes in hilly Nelson, she had taught her daughter how to ride two-wheelers and how to do so around traffic. She had also wanted to



Ramsey Frombach with her new bike.

VIA KELSEY FROMBACH

get a replacement for the bike Ramsey had outgrown, but that had proved to be a steeper climb for a single mother.

"Trying to find a used bike at a reasonable price wasn't the easiest," she said. So, yes, to have this new ride appear out of the blue was most welcome.

More than that, though, it meant the world to be shown that sort of kindness by strangers who just wanted to do something nice for someone they knew little about.

Kelsey cried when she learned what

Szabo et al had done. What a great lesson for Ramsey, whom her mother describes as a bright, sunny child. What an affirming message after a couple of tough years in which people haven't always treated her another as well as they could, Kelsey says.

"It's one of those stories you read on the internet," she said. "It always makes your heart feel good, but you never expect to be part of the story."

Yes, we do read stories like that, and there are many more just like them that go unreported, particularly at this time of year when people allow their more generous selves to shine through — inevitably finding, as Szabo said, that being the giver can be as uplifting as being the givee. If that's a cliché, it's because it's true, Charlie Brown.

It's Christmas Eve. You're probably not ready. All those last-minute tasks you were going to get done this week fell through the ice when Mother Nature turned Saanich into Siberia, so maybe you're stressed.

Maybe, having remembered what you forgot to get for dinner, you're peering out the window at the weather, wondering if anyone will mind if you skip the Brussels sprouts (no, they won't) or the cranberry sauce (yes, they will).

Maybe the people you were going to share the holiday with are still stuck on the other side of the strait. There's no shortage of stuff to frown about at the happiest time of the year.

But there are also, when we remember to be kind, plenty of reasons to smile.

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