Oh Christmas Tree!
By Rick Fletcher

Shorter days and cool rains have announced the start of fall. Many Oregonians will soon be searching for just the right Christmas tree and trimmings for their holiday celebration. As a young person, growing up on a ranch in rural Oregon, this meant wading through sometimes waist deep snow, high in the Cascades, cutting and dragging trees for our family and others who bought them from us through the local supermarket. The hard work and cold weather left a definite impression on me, as well as how difficult it was to find good quality trees in the natural forest.

Thanks to the efforts of Oregon Christmas tree production pioneers like Corvallis resident, Hal Schudel, nearly all real Christmas trees these days are produced on farms, not thinned out of native forests. Today Oregon is the leading Christmas tree producing state in the United States, with more than 7 million produced each year according to figures from the National Christmas Tree Association. The next closest state is North Carolina with 3.5 million trees produced, then Michigan with 3.0 million. Nationwide Americans annually purchase approximately 33 million real Christmas trees and 9 million artificial ones, although more households have plastic trees each year than real trees because of the reuse option with plastic trees.

Here in Oregon, Christmas trees rank as one of the top ten agricultural commodities, with 2009 farm sales estimated at $101 million dollars by the National Agricultural Statistics Service through a grower survey. Linn and Benton Counties have significant Christmas tree plantings with the 2009 harvest estimated at 1.3 million trees and a farmgate value of ~$18.5 million. Leading counties for production include Clackamas, Marion, Polk, and Benton. Linn County’s production of Christmas trees is also on the rise, with Christmas trees replacing grass seed in the Stayton-Scio ridge area, and some new tree farms in the Sweet Home area.

So what does the market look like for Oregon trees in 2009? From early indications, it is good news for the consumer and not so rosy news for most growers. There appears to be plenty of trees to go around, particularly in the noble fir market. Douglas-fir trees seem to be in shorter supply, but the harvest is only beginning, and trees will not appear on retail lots until Thanksgiving. Wholesale prices have fallen significantly for growers in the past few years, particularly for noble fir, which is only worth about 50-60% of what it was 3 years ago. With costs of production continuing to climb, this has made Christmas tree growing much less profitable than it was. Given the 6-10 years of investment required to produce a crop, some growers are choosing to reduce plantings or get out of the business all together. A survey of Oregon growers for 2009 indicated only 5.5 million trees planted, which would mean a crop of only about 4 million trees in 6-8 years versus the 7 million we now produce.

Oregon’s climb to prominence amongst tree producing states has been aided by being a great place to grow trees and advancing tree growing technology. OSU Extension is now working with growers to reduce production costs, and test new tree species that may help
expand future markets through applied research projects on nutrition, genetics and culturing. Through shared projects with the PNW Christmas Tree Association growers can produce trees which are more insect and disease resistant, hold their needles better after cutting and produce more good trees per acre.

Although 92% of Oregon Christmas trees are shipped out of state, there are lots of opportunities for you to cash in on Oregon’s high quality Christmas tree business for your family Christmas tree this year. Here are some suggestions to make your personal search more productive and your holiday experience more enjoyable.

**What species of trees are available?** The most popular and most expensive Christmas tree historically has been the noble fir. Native to the higher elevations in the Cascades and Coast Range, this blue-green tree, with distinctly layered branches is a pleasure to decorate, and least likely to shed needles on your living room carpet. If you go up to the Cascades to look for a noble, you might easily mistake a sub-alpine or Pacific silver fir for the noble, and if so they should do fine, although they will not perform as well after cutting as the nobles. If you go looking for a noble fir on a local tree farm, be warned that it will likely be much denser and bushy than the natural ones, losing some of its natural layering. If you want help in distinguishing between the different species, stop by the OSU Extension office and pick up a copy of *Trees to Know in Oregon*, before you depart. The award winning all color guide will only cost you $14, and will be a great companion for your forest wanderings.

Next in popularity would be the fluffy and full Douglas-fir, our state tree. These trees have long been the standard of the industry, but many locals feel that these sheared trees look more like a bush than a tree. If you like a full looking tree, this one will fit your need and should be reasonable on your pocketbook. If you keep them in water, the needles should stay on the tree for the month of December.

A local favorite for some folks is the wonderfully fragrant grand fir. Indeed this tree just smells like Christmas, and its dark green needles and full shape are quite attractive. The only drawback appears to be occasional needle retention problems, but if you wait until early-December to cut it and keep it in water, it should hold its needles quite well. I have personally had this species in our house for up to 5 weeks with minimal needle loss, but just do not let it dry out.

There are several other species of trees that you may want to sample, just for a change of pace. Scotch pines are the classic tree of the Midwest. They hold needles well, and have sharp enough needles to keep cats and kids at bay. Blue spruce has similar characteristics and offers a nice, blue-green color.

New species that you might want to consider are Nordmann and Turkish fir. These species are very popular in Europe, but local growers are discovering their merits and beginning to grow them here also. They have stiff, dark green to silvery green foliage and a very nice shape. There needle retention is good if kept in water.
**How should I care for my tree once it is cut?** This is an important question, with lots of confusing myths floating around out there every year. In spite of the claims of many tree preservative products, good old water seems to be the best recipe for making sure your tree remains fire resistant and that it does not drop its needles. Waiting as late as possible before you cut your tree is a great idea. Trees cut in early December perform better than trees cut in mid-November. Once you bring the tree home, store it in a cool, moist place until you bring it in the house. When you do bring it in, cut about ½ inches off the bottom of the stem to reopen the water conducting tissues and place the tree in a water stand that holds at least 1 gallon of water. Drilling holes in the base of the tree will not improve water uptake. Some people advocate putting everything from honey to aspirin in the water to help preserve the tree, but tests have shown that plain water does just fine. Place the tree away from heat sources such as fireplaces, wood stoves and heater vents. Check the tree at least once a day to ensure that it does not run out of water. If it runs dry of water, you may have to remove it from the tree stand and recut its base to get it to continue taking up water. When the holiday season is over, you can easily recycle your tree through the local disposal companies, which make the trees into mulch.

**Where can I get a Christmas tree?** You have a number of good options for getting a high quality tree. Local retail lots provide a good selection of fresh trees, and the convenience of cash and carry. They are sprinkled throughout all the major cities in our region.

If you want a bit more of an adventure, a number of U-cut farms are open for business during the holidays. Check the classified ad section of the local paper, or you can get a free Oregon U-cut directory from your County Extension Office (967-3871). You can also view the guide online at [www.nwtrees.com](http://www.nwtrees.com). Local farms listed in the guide include Phillips on River Road, near Lebanon, Vollstedts, on Quarry Road in North Albany, Donovan’s on the western edge of Corvallis, and Sunrise Tree Farm in Kings Valley. Many of the U-cut farms offer more of an experience than just cutting your own tree. Sunrise Tree Farm in Kings Valley offers a full range of holiday decorations, and even a Christmas tree maze to entertain the troops. They also have added Ecology Tours to introduce you to the farming practices they use to protect the earth while they produce trees for your living room. Donovan’s and Vollstedt’s provide horse drawn wagons to take tree cutters around the farm.

The most adventurous of all may be the traditional trip up to the high elevation federal forests. Although it sounds romantic to have the family trudging through the snow finding the family Christmas tree, this venture will require some planning. Besides a well equipped vehicle, you also will need to have appropriate clothing, emergency equipment, and your own saw. Permits are available from the Siuslaw National Forest in Corvallis and the Willamette National Forest Ranger Stations in Sweet Home and Detroit. One more word of advice from someone who has been there, finding the perfect Christmas tree is much more difficult in a natural forest than it is on a Christmas tree farm. Happy hiking!