

Canadians spending more on fake Christmas trees than real ones...

by Andrew Duffy

The Ottawa Citizen, December 18, 2014

With so much of what's under our Christmas trees now made in China, maybe it was inevitable that the tree itself would be manufactured there, too.

Statistics Canada figures show that – for the first time ever – the value of imported artificial trees now exceeds that of fresh-cut Christmas trees grown on Canadian soil.

Domestic Christmas tree growers brought in \$55.2 million in 2013, according to Statistics Canada, but the value of their crop was surpassed by that of artificial imports, which generated \$56.2 million for foreign manufacturers. The vast majority of those fake Christmas trees came from China.

The market for fake imports has climbed steadily since 2001 when Canadians bought \$20 million worth of artificial Christmas trees. By 2009, Canadians plunked down \$39 million a year for the metal and plastic variety, according to Statistics Canada. Last year, artificial tree sales jumped another 12% year over year.

"We do have a concern with that market – they are our big competitor," said Shirley Brennan, president of the Canadian Christmas Tree Growers Association. "But we're holding our own and we're pleased that our sales are also on the increase."

Christmas tree growers in Canada saw their revenues climb 6.1% last year, and Brennan said projections suggest sales will again rise this year, thanks largely to increased exports to the northeastern United States.

The key to turning back the challenge posed by artificial Christmas trees, she said, rests with education. "There will always be the artificial tree: We just need to make more consumers aware of the benefits of a real tree," Brennan said. "We are 100% biodegradable and recyclable – and you can't say that about an artificial tree."

Lewis Downey, executive director of the association, said fresh-cut Christmas tree sales are driven by families who want to give their children the "real Christmas experience," but many young people are eschewing tradition altogether. A poll in the U.S., he said, found that 40% of New Englanders didn't put up any kind of Christmas tree... real or fake.

"The people using natural trees are the ones who like to preserve tradition, but fewer people are holding to tradition," said Downey, whose association's slogan is – "Nothing says Christmas more than a real Christmas tree."

In Ottawa, local Christmas tree growers tend to worry more about the weather than the competition posed by artificial imports from China.

Kenny Stuyt, owner of Fallowfield Tree Farm, said his family has been growing and selling Christmas trees in Ottawa for over 50 years. He expects to see sales increase – by 5 to 10% -- because of a warmer, kinder December this year.

"Coming to the tree farm is more of a family tradition," he said. "So it often depends on the weather. We have three big weekends in December and if one of those days is like today – freezing rain – that can make or break things for us. Then people may think, 'Ah, let's just put the artificial tree up this year, or go to Home Depot and grab one quick.'"

This year, Stuyt said, December weekends have been relatively warm, making it more enjoyable for families interested in cutting their own trees. The most common argument he's heard in favour of artificial trees comes from those who want to avoid the hassle of sweeping up fallen tree needles.

"We may lose a few buyers each year, but then we gain a bunch more, too. I think the tradition still exists... people like a real tree, they like the smell of them, and most of them are willing to put up with the mess."

Christmas trees by the numbers...

1,573,836	The number of freshly-cut Christmas trees exported from Canada to the U.S. in 2013
\$25.5 million	The value of Canadian Christmas trees sold to U.S. buyers
2,381	The number of farms that grew Christmas trees in Canada in 2011
Zero	The number of Christmas trees exported from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador
14	The percentage of U.S. Christmas tree sales from “cut-your-own” customers
4	The number of liters of water a freshly-cut Christmas tree can absorb each day
\$1.16 billion	The value of the U.S. market for real Christmas trees in 2013
\$1.19 billion	The value of the U.S. market for artificial Christmas trees in 2013
Sources: Statistics Canada & the National Christmas Tree Association	

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