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## Buy or rent some Christmas cheer

By Sue Doyle, Staff Writer

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Victor Sanchez organizes Christmas trees at Green Thumb Nursery in Canoga Park, CA Friday December 11, 2009. Green Thumb is reducing some of their holiday merchandise and Christmas trees to 30 percent off. (Andy Holzman/Staff Photographer)

For the Morrisons, this is the first year in their new West Toluca Lake home and the first holiday with their new baby girl. And now the couple has embarked on a new holiday tradition - renting a live Christmas tree.

For \$100, the family ordered a 7-foot Blue Spruce from a South Bay Christmas tree retailer, complete with tree delivery and pickup after the holiday.

Next year, the same tree will arrive at their door - a custom the Morrisons want to continue every Christmas.

"We're really excited to make this part of our family tradition," said Cassandra Morrison, 35. "We think it puts an innovative approach to the traditional Christmas tree."

Though the tree cost \$25 more than the family hoped to spend this year, the sheer convenience of not picking up the tree and tying it to the car roof was well worth the price difference.

But others are pinching their pennies more when it comes to splurging on Christmas trees.

John Irwin, general manager of Green Thumb Super Garden in Canoga Park, said sales of artificial trees dropped by 40 percent last year - a trend he expects to continue this holiday.

Irwin said the change of heart was all about the money.

Shoppers will fork out \$40 for a regular cut tree in this sluggish economy, and fewer will pay \$300 for an artificial one, he said.

"It wasn't about being green," Irwin said. "It was about saving money."

Inside the Sherman Way store, 30

percent-off signs now hang on the artificial trees to entice shoppers to buy them again this year.

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The trend spanned across the country last year, with a 38 percent drop in sales of artificial trees from 2007, according to the National Christmas Tree Association, based in Missouri.

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At the same time, there was a 10 percent dip in sales of live Christmas trees from one year earlier, according to the association.

So to encourage more spending on live trees, several local Christmas tree retailers have slashed prices up to 30 percent from last year.

The rows of Fraser firs and grand firs ranging from \$49 to \$125 at Pierce College Farm Center are selling 20 to 30 percent cheaper than last year after recent negotiations with Christmas tree growers.

"We said those prices have to come down or we're going to order less from you," said Farm Center director Robert McBroom.

It's the first year the Woodland Hills-based facility cut prices on trees.

This weekend should be the high point of the Christmas-tree-selling season, but already the Farm Center has seen a 15 percent jump in sales, McBroom said.

Meanwhile consumers like the Morrisons interested in renting trees have spurred a more than 200-percent rise in sales at The Living Christmas Co., a South Bay retailer now in its second year of business.

Small trees up to 3 feet high cost about \$50, while large ones reaching 8 feet are \$185. Prices include delivery and pick-up after Christmas, said owner Scott Martin.

The idea to rent Christmas trees began when Martin worked in landscaping as a teen, delivered trees to homeowners and knew it was "the most fun you could possibly have," he said.

But he wanted to change what happens weeks after the holidays when dead trees are dragged out to the curb and hauled away. He thought of recycling the trees to reuse.

Last year he launched The Living Christmas Co. and rented out 120 trees. As the trees stayed safe at a site during the rest of the year, word of the new business spread. So far this year 400 trees have sold, Martin said.

"Our prices are a little more, but I think people see the value in it," he said. "It's gaining traction."

For some, having a Christmas tree in the house is a significant break from tradition.

Leila Sarbakhsh, 27, of Canoga Park was raised Muslim and does not celebrate Christmas.

But growing up in Southern California, Sarbakhsh longed for a tree to decorate with lights and ornaments during the holidays like many of her friends did. Her parents frowned on the thought.

Now living on her own, the Canoga Park woman has set aside \$100 to buy her very first tree to set up in her apartment. For her, the tree has nothing to do with religion.

"The whole celebration is about bringing people together," she said. "That means a lot to me."

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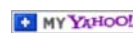
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