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Michal Czerwonka for The New York Times

Scott Martin delivering a rented Christmas tree to Megan and Nick Arquette's home last week in Torrance, Calif.

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER  
Published: December 16, 2009

TORRANCE, Calif. — It is a nibble weird that a guy who describes his relationship to Christmas as “hostile” runs around greater Los Angeles in a floppy red Santa hat and answers his [iPhone](#), “Merry Christmas, this is Scotty Claus!”

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Michal Czerwonka for The New York Times  
Justin Casillas made a delivery at a Torrance, Calif., apartment.

But bummed as false merriment and gift obligations render him, Scott Martin — landscape architect and tree hugger in a literal sense — was unnerved by the sight of post-Christmas trees lying about like so much discarded sausage casing.

What people really ought to do, he reasoned, was rent a Christmas tree, and return it, alive, to the nursery after the season.

Mr. Martin's idea, enabled by a rotten economy that made his free time greater and his potential labor pool deeper, is now manifest in his new business delivering live,

potted Christmas trees that are taken away once the toys have been unwrapped and, possibly, already broken, and the New Year's confetti has been swept away.

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Rentable Christmas trees, which have been tried in Oregon and a smattering of other places over the years, are a perfect match for Los Angeles, he said, where Christmas trees have “an image issue,” and escaping a drive through traffic with a tree strapped to a car roof is especially welcome.

“You can try anything here, and no one will tell you it’s a bad idea,” said Mr. Martin, who is 30 and grew up in the South Bay here, where as a teenager he delivered trees for a nursery. “California is more attached to the green movement, so they are more willing to try this service here.”

To rent a tree, a customer visits Mr. Martin’s Web site, [livingchristmas.com](http://livingchristmas.com), picks out a tree from among several varieties and then awaits delivery. Delivery days are determined by geography, to save time and gas. Prices range from \$50, for a two-to-three-foot number, up to \$185 for something bigger. While two weeks is the recommended length of stay for a live tree in a house, Mr. Martin lets his customers keep them for three.

The tree is then picked up to join its evergreen cousins; they will summer together on industrial properties where Mr. Martin rents space for pennies on the dollar to house his inventory. People who want the same tree next year ask for it to be tagged with their name, so it might return next December, taller.

Extra-credit points: The delivery trucks run on [biodiesel](#); the trees are cared for by adults with disabilities; the drivers will pick up donations for Goodwill and used wrapping paper for recycling; and the Web site also sells eco-friendly, fair-trade ornaments.

Mr. Martin — whose landscape architecture work slowed quite a bit this year, given that most of it was in Dubai — gets delivery help from some laid-off architects he knows. “They are willing, for \$15 an hour, to put on reindeer antlers and tell people ‘Merry Christmas.’ ”

Last Friday, Mr. Martin expertly threaded his truck through the small streets and secret byways of Manhattan Beach, until he pulled up in front of an old beach house where, naturally, there was no parking.

“Can we steal your driveway to deliver a Christmas tree?” he gamely asked a neighbor, who appeared to find it hard to say no to a cheerful pair of guys — Mr. Martin and his helper, Justin (Season) Casillas — in festive headwear carrying a spruce. Delilah and Charlotte Samuels, the children of the house, came racing out into the drizzle to check out the incoming tree.

Their mother, Megan Arquette, buried her nose in the branches. “Ramona, you’re back!” she said, taking in the tree’s scent. “Ummmm. It smells so good.”

The family was one of last year’s handful of pilot customers; this year, the company has rented 400 trees and expects to finish the season with 500.

“We love this,” Ms. Arquette said of tree renting. “It stays fresh, the cleanup is minimal because it doesn’t drop anything, and it goes away and comes back next year. It’s kind of like having a little pet.”

The drive to anthropomorphize live trees seems common. Alice Haliburton, who heard about tree rentals from a pal in her spinning class, was giddy to see her “fluffy” tree arrive, so much so that she jumped around a little. “He smells great, and he’s got a good home!” she exclaimed as Mr. Martin and Mr. Casillas wedged him into a corner of her apartment in Redondo Beach. “And you can see he’s happy.”

Yeah, so there can be problems. The guy who was supposed to pick up storage trays for the trees out in Chino left without them. People get touchy about trees. They don’t appreciate traffic. “I try to explain it’s Christmas, and it’s a tree,” Mr. Martin said. “I say:

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But he looks forward to bringing his trees back next year. "Your kids are growing, your trees are growing, it's really dynamic," he said. "We're breathing new life into the holiday."

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