



Christmas trees with many happy returns for South Bay residents

By Kristin S. Agostoni Staff Writer

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Scott "Scotty Claus" Martin started The Living Christmas Co., which rents living trees for Christmas and then picks them up after the holidays; thus reducing the amount of waste to landfills. (Steve McCrank)

Scott Martin wore a Santa hat as he surveyed the rows of Aleppo and Monterey pines, little sequoias and blue cedars lined up last week outside a Torrance nursery.

He'd grouped them by size and had tags affixed to their branches, which had been shaped into near-perfect Christmas trees. It should be just a few weeks before his conifers make their way into local living rooms.

Only unlike other distributors this holiday season, Martin is going to see his trees again.

That's because he's renting them out through his Living Christmas Co., a venture that aims to reduce the number of cut trees that get tossed to the curb after the holidays.

"Having something alive in the room has a different feeling altogether, and it's a talking point," said Martin, a landscape architect from Rolling Hills Estates who is the company's founder. "One of the things we try to say is, it's not your grandma's tree, it's your children's tree."

The company gives customers a chance to choose a potted conifer online from a variety of species and sizes. A crew will deliver the tree anywhere from Long Beach to Pacific Palisades, set it up, and return to haul it away on a designated pick-up date.

The Christmas trees, all of which have tags and bar codes, will then be stored at a handful of local sites and nurtured during the off-season. Repeat customers will be able to request the same tree and see how it's grown in subsequent years - at least until the tree grows so big that it will have to be planted.

The Living Christmas Co. had a soft opening last year, when 120 trees were offered for rent mostly through community groups, Martin said. But this season, he and four colleagues have expanded the lot of trees available for rent and

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rolled out the concept to the general public.

Orders can be placed online for trees ranging from \$50 for a 2- to 3-foot-tall little sequoia to \$185 for a 7- to 8-foot-tall Monterey Pine.

Not cheap compared with the price of cut trees at chain stores such as The Home Depot, but Martin points out that the price includes delivery and pick-up.

And money aside, his goal is for customers to celebrate the holidays with the environment in mind.

Martin, who goes by Scotty Claus, said the idea stems from his experience as a teenager delivering trees for a Manhattan Beach nursery.

Back then, he was struck by the fact that a conifer could build so much excitement within a household during the holiday season, yet "you'd drive by and see it lying on the curb afterward," he said.

The Living Christmas Co. has committed to various eco-conscious operating principles, including the use of biodiesel-powered delivery trucks and bamboo tree stakes. It also sells ornaments made of recyclable materials and will pick up donations of clothing and other items through a partnership with Goodwill Industries, Martin said.

In addition to storing trees at local nurseries, including Torrance's Rainforest Flora, he's hoping

to move others to a portion of a refinery site in Carson.

Martin describes his Living Christmas Co. more as a regenerative business than a sustainable one.

"We have the ability to not just sustain what we're doing, but have a net benefit," he said.

Given his upfront costs, including the wholesale cost of the trees, Martin said he does not expect to make a profit this year. His goal is modest; he'd like to rent out 2,500 of 7,500 trees.

But the Living Christmas Co. should have at least two repeat customers.

Damira and Milo Bacic, founders of Manhattan Beach's Shade Hotel, said the idea was new to them last year when they won a rented tree at an event they'd attended.

"The best part was, it didn't have to be destroyed or shredded," Damira Bacic said.


This Christmas, they're planning on two: one for their house and another for the hotel lounge.


On the Web

For more information, go to www.livingchristmas.com.


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