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Try a locally grown Douglas fir for Christmas



By Daniel Goulart December 3, 2010 12:00 am

With Christmas fast approaching, along with the promise of big family dinners comes the dilemma many families face: What kind of tree will they get? Will they pull down the fiber optic out of the attic, or go down to the tree farm to pick out the perfect pine? Will they make their own wreath, or use the one they've kept from past years? With a dizzying number of traditional plants available - trees, berries, nuts, and fruits - some Sonoma County residents may wonder how, as with their food, they can make their Christmas traditions more local. The Laguna de Santa Rosa is home to a wide variety of things that can either substitute for more commonly used plants, or that are already in widespread use, to make the most out of the holiday season with less.

When European settlers first arrived in California, they found a common berried shrub that bore such a resemblance to their native Holly berry, they mistook it entirely. Toyon was so widespread, in fact, they named a town after what they thought was growing all around it - Hollywood. Collection of the plant was so frequent, for example, that in the 1920s a law was enacted at the state level to prevent people collecting it or any other plant on public lands because its population was being ravaged in the nearby Santa Monica hills. Toyon is also a great plant for your xeriscape garden. Growing 6-1/2 to 18 feet, this plant loves partial shade, and you'll have a homegrown supply of decorations year after year.

One of the holiday's most popular Christmas tree varieties - and my personal favorite - is the Douglas fir, Sonoma County's second largest timber crop by volume. Growing largely among the oak forests that line the county's hills in the north and west, the Douglas fir is actually something of a quandary for local preservationists and habitat restorers. While Douglas firs are native to Sonoma County, they've become very invasive in areas of land where they were never observed before or were less common, taking over places where oak woodland once grew following fire suppression and logging in the 20th and 21st centuries. Growing up to 250 feet tall, Douglas fir trees grow tall and thick in forests occupying a wide range of habitats, making them easy to farm, as are many Christmas and lumber trees. I found a number of farms that sell fresh-cut trees through Google with "Sonoma County Christmas Tree Farm."

Sonoma County's mild, Mediterranean climate boasts one of the most accommodating growing seasons in California, itself known for superb growing conditions. And with consciousness growing year by year, month by month of where not only our food comes from, but everything else we use in our globalized lives, it's worth taking into consideration that everything from what we wear to what we decorate our homes with comes from somewhere before arriving in the storefront window. Growing a Toyon bush in one's backyard not only attracts wildlife and beautifies one's home, but it can be harvested to decorate the home (as well as others', if you're willing to share), and getting a Douglas fir grown in Sonoma County from a local farmer is more personal than a tree from who knows where.

Lots can be done to lessen our effects on the world, and sometimes the little things can not only do just that, but make the holidays a little more personal as well.

Daniel Goulart is a graduating senior at Sonoma State University, and has been working with Cotati Creek Critters since late last year to restore the Laguna de Santa Rosa channel.

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