

Tree sales doing fine

Most lots report business equal to or better than last year

BY WARREN WISE
The Post and Courier
Wednesday, December 9, 2009

The Grinch has not stolen Christmas tree sales this year.

From Mount Pleasant to North Charleston to West Ashley, pop-up tree lots that last year reported weak sales after the financial-market meltdown are seeing roughly the same or better sales this year.

"We are up from last year," said Chris Cox of the Sides Nursery lot on Johnnie Dodds Boulevard in Mount Pleasant. "We are on track for sales from the year before last."



Warren Wise

Chris Cox, of the Sides Nursery lot on Johnnie Dodds Boulevard in Mount Pleasant, said sales are up from last year. 'We are on track for sales from the year before last,' he said.

In anticipation of weaker sales, Cox cut his overhead this year. He didn't spring for the big tent and he trimmed his extra help.

He still ordered the same number of trees -- about 1,000 -- and he expects to sell out as he has every year except for last year, when he was left with 60 trees and garland he tossed in the trash.

"I've already sold out of garland this year," he said. "I could see people downsizing this time last year. People are cutting back to some degree, but not on the Christmas tree this year."

In North Charleston at the Christmas Tree Outlet on Ashley Phosphate Road that's been in business since 1990, owner Kenzie Cook said sales are holding steady.

"I didn't order as many trees this year, and I'm charging a little bit less than last year," he said.

His trees sell from \$19 for a table-top model to \$129 for the biggest perishable, fragrant seasonal symbol.

"We are selling more of the \$29 and \$39 trees this year," he said. "People are still looking for deals."

He predicted that his sales will be fine this year.

"This coming weekend is our busiest," Cook said. "I'm hoping it doesn't rain too much Saturday."

The forecast calls a 60 percent chance of showers on Saturday but mostly cloudy on Sunday, according to the National Weather Service.

Rainy weather last Saturday cut into the West Ashley Optimist Club's tree sales, putting them a little bit behind last year's sales at this time but not too much, said Kevin Walsh, executive director of St. Andrew's Parks and Playground, where the trees are sold on Playground Road.

The club ordered 525 trees this year and has not quite sold half yet. They range from \$20 to \$85, and the proceeds go to charity.

"The bigger trees sold out first," Walsh said.

That's because they were not top-tier trees and the price was reduced, he said. "I wish I had ordered more of them."

This coming weekend is usually the club's biggest sales time as well, but Walsh, an Optimist Club member, took the weather forecast in stride.

"It's good for the health of the trees," he said with a chuckle. "We are the Optimist Club. We have to look on the bright side."

Christmas tree sales vary from region to region in the country, with shoppers in the Midwest and Northeast buying trees earlier than their Southern and Southwestern neighbors, but so far overall national tree sales are doing well, according to Rick Dungey with the National Christmas Tree Association in Missouri.

The association tracks sales informally via e-mailed comments from owners of tree lots and farms across the country each weekend during the season. The survey did not include last weekend's sales.

"We are off to a fast start," Dungey said of the first weekend sales. "It sounds like most people are doing really well. I think there was some cautious optimism in the industry this year."

In 2008, consumers bought 28.2 million live Christmas trees and spent \$1.03 billion, according to the tree association. On average, they spent \$36.50 per tree. They also purchased 11.7 million artificial trees at a cost of \$709 million, about \$24 more per tree.

Those numbers were down considerably from 2007, when consumers took home 31.3 million live Christmas trees and spent \$1.3 billion, according to the tree association. On average, they spent \$41.50 per tree. They also bought 17.4 million artificial trees in 2007 at a cost of \$1.2 billion.

Oregon leads the nation in Christmas tree production at nearly 6.8 million. North Carolina, where many Lowcountry trees come from, comes in second at nearly 3.1 million trees harvested, according to the tree association.

"A lot of people are looking for a big kick in sales this coming weekend," Dungey said. "After all, we are just two weeks before Christmas."

National tree sales

--2008 28.2 million

--2007 31.3 million

--2006 28.6 million

--2005 32.8 million

--2004 27.1 million

--2003 23.4 million

--2002 22.2 million

--2001 27.8 million

Reach **Warren Wise** at 937-5524 or wwise@postandcourier.com.