

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

## **Paying someone else to deck the halls**

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Column: Deirdre McMurdy

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Sheridan Nurseries in Toronto will sell you either an artificial or a real Christmas tree. If you opt for a real one, they'll deliver it, set it up, "fluff" it and install the lights for about \$150. They'll even add Christmas ornaments from their inventory, which typically run from \$10 to \$25, and decorate the tree for you, or add your decorations for an hourly fee.

According to Paula Manion, manager of White Rose Crafts and Nursery in Nepean, Ont., a 12- to 14-foot deluxe Fraser fir tree costs as much as \$230. Its appeal is its appearance and the fact its needles are especially long-lasting. A six-foot balsam tree, by contrast, runs about \$25. Either can be delivered for about \$50 and installed for another \$25.

If you don't want to install your Christmas lights in October, when it's still relatively mild outside and you don't fancy freezing your paws in December, the Christmas Light Guys are on call in Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton.

They started the business in 1994 and it has gained momentum every year, employing eight people full-time from the second week in October in Calgary. In the run-up to Christmas, they typically field 80 calls a day for service.

According to founding partner Scott Machej, the average family pays them about \$275 to decorate the exterior of a home, although some Calgarians have paid as much as \$4,000 to illuminate trees, shrubs and the contours of roof lines. The "Guys" charge a \$200 minimum, and there's a per-foot charge after that.

If you don't have Christmas lights on hand, or if the strings you have don't work, the Christmas Light Guys will supply them. And most important of all, they return to remove the lights when the holidays are over.

Those who are looking for some tasteful, seasonal foliage for the exterior and interior of their homes, can turn to Gilbert Lanouette of Fleurs Gilbert in Montreal. The veteran florist designs custom wreaths for the doors of his clients starting at \$150 and the wreaths range beyond the \$500 mark. He also decorates interior banisters with balsam garlands, delivers, installs and decorates Christmas trees, enhances fireplace mantles and provides seasonal floral arrangements such as amaryllis, orchids, calla lilies and tulips.

"We have all sorts of regular clients who just call up and want the works," says Lanouette. "The bookings start to build by mid-November."

When it comes to shopping, gift wrapping and the myriad of errands required in the prelude to Christmas, a concierge service can come in handy.

In Vancouver, Peggy McConnell and her sister, Joanie, run Errand Girls. At this time of year, they shop for their clients -- especially for males who are baffled by the prospect of shopping for women, says Peggy. Their services are also popular as gift certificates -- they sell a block of three hours time for \$80.

"At this time of year, it's a real mixed bag -- we're doing people's grocery shopping, taking packages to the post office, going to the liquor store, driving people in our mini-vans after office parties," McConnell says. "We also work with caterers and personal chefs to fill the gaps at a lot of holiday parties."

**In Montreal, another team of sisters, Paula and Karen Quinn, is also helping to contain the frenzy. Les Concierges K&P will decorate your home for the holidays, buy and wrap presents, obtain tickets, book hotel rooms. Their rates are flexible, depending on the job required.**

**"One woman wanted to give her cousin two red maple trees, so we found those, arranged to plant them in the spring, took pictures of them, made up a gift certificate," says Paula Quinn.**

**For other clients, she has obtained Christmas cards, developed a mailing list, printed the envelopes and purchased and affixed the stamps.**

**"All you have to do is sign and lick," she laughs.**

At Holt Renfrew stores across Canada, there is a personal shopper service available-free of charge. In Toronto, for example, Christina McDowell, helps men to find everything from lingerie to fur coats.

"We're geared to suit any budget really. You come in, I listen to you, make suggestions and locate it in the store," she says. "With regular clients, I even know what they have, what they need -- which makes it even easier to coordinate."

Her top pick for both men and women? "Cashmere, cashmere, cashmere," she says.

And in the end, if you can't face foraging for groceries and cooking for your clan, for example, the Fairmont Winnipeg Hotel is happy to do it for you. From their kitchens, you can order a roasted turkey packed with sage-bread stuffing, cranberry sauce, gravy, potatoes, a vegetable medley and rolls. If you're feeling

especially overwhelmed, or you judge that sharp metal objects are a particular hazard around family members at Christmas, they'll even carve it for you and deliver the whole kit in a taxi.

A 10- to 13-pound bird with all the trimmings will cost you \$222.30 (tax included). That feeds about 10 people. The other option is a 14- to 17-pound bird for \$267.90. For dessert, a Yule log runs about \$35 and feeds 10.

Once all the calls have been placed and all the services rendered for a stress-reduced Yule, there's only one thing left to do: make sure you can pay for it all.

Deirdre McMurdy is co-host of Global TV's MoneyWise program.

Illustration:

- Photo: Canadian Press / Why make the kids do it? Chores like decorating your Christmas tree, buying gifts, even carving the turkey can be delegated to someone else -- at a hefty cost.