

## *Christmas Tree Script*

<VALLEY 101 THEME SONG or HOLIDAY MUSIC FADES IN>

**KAILA:** Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com where we answer the questions *you* ask about metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White.

**TAYLOR:** And I'm your producer for today, Taylor Seely.

**KAILA:** From the Valley 101 team to you, we want to wish you...

**TAYLOR AND KAILA:** HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

**KAILA:** So Taylor, what question are you answering today?

**TAYLOR:** For today's holiday edition episode, I'm answering the question: Where do real Christmas trees in Arizona come from?

**KAILA:** We ran a week-long poll on our twitter account a few weeks ago, asking how many of our followers bought real trees for the holidays. \_\_\_% said they did! So in case you've ever had this question, this episode's for you.

<VALLEY 101 THEME SONG FADES OUT>

<jingle bells start>

### *PART 1: Cutting your own tree from a national forest*

**TAYLOR:** Hi, I'm Taylor. And... I've never experienced a white Christmas. Now, for most of the United States, that might be a little weird. But if you're a Phoenix local, that's just reality. In fact, if you're a Phoenix local, you know Christmas doesn't always require a coat. We *never* get snow, and if it weren't for the decorations and music at shopping centers, you'd never know it was the holiday season. So it makes sense that some people work extra hard to get into the Christmas spirit. <bells fade out>

**Scott Hanson:** Well, we started cutting down Christmas trees as a family. My wife and I, [00:00:35][4.2]

**Scott Hanson:** [00:01:43] It is way, way easier to go to Home Depot and get a tree. [00:01:48][4.6]

**TAYLOR:** That's Scott Hanson. He lives here in the Valley, and for 30 years, he and his wife cut down their own Christmas tree each season.

**Scott Hanson:** [00:01:54] You know, it's a process for us. It was it was a day long deal [00:01:56][2.5]

**Scott Hanson:** [00:02:21] but it was something that we did as a family. And our neighbors and friends participated. And ... It was really a great tradition for us for so many years. And we got some great memories of being able to do that as a family. [00:02:38][16.8]

**TAYLOR:** Like I said, Phoenix isn't exactly what you picture when you look up winter in the dictionary. SO I wanted to take some time hearing about this process.

**Brady Smith:** [00:01:01] So there are five national forests in Arizona that offer Christmas tree permits and those vary in quantities and locations. [00:01:11][10.4]

**TAYLOR:** That's Brady Smith, he's a spokesman for the Coconino National Forest. I asked him which national forests in Arizona offer permits to cut down Christmas trees.

**Brady Smith:** [00:01:33] ~~Yeah, of course, it's one of us.~~ The Coconino National Forest.// Then you have the Prescott National Forest.// Kaibab. [00:01:41][8.0] // [00:01:43] The Apache-Sitgreaves. And the Tonto [00:01:47][3.8]

**TAYLOR:** I should probably mention: You can't just pull over and cut down any tree. Each forest that gives out permits designates certain sections of the forest where you can cut trees. And Brady said not every forest offers the same quantity of trees.

**Brady Smith:** [00:01:21] So each national forest is going to have a certain set number of permits that they're offering. Some offer more, some offer less. [00:01:27][5.9]

**TAYLOR:** The number each forest offers varies by year. But this year, the Coconino Forest -- where Brady's located -- is offering 1,200 permits. The Apache-Sitgreaves had 7,500. The Prescott National has 600. The Kaibab offers 2,300. And the Tonto has 3,500. In total, that's 15,100 Christmas trees. The forests don't actually count the # of trees cut down each year. The assumption is, if you buy a permit - which cost about \$15 - you're getting a tree. And they sell out FAST. Also, you're only allowed 1 tree per family. So by that math, about 15,000 Arizona families will cut their own tree this year.

Scott Hanson, the man who cut his own tree for 30 years, said it was a fun and memorable experience. But you shouldn't *necessarily* romanticize it - most of the memorable experiences were the times when something went wrong...

**Scott Hanson** [00:22:37] We did have one year when we were coming back from Flagstaff with our trees. We'd gotten one for my mom and she didn't go on the

trip. But we were somewhere between Sedona and Cortez Junction coming south on I-17, and my mom's tree blew out of the back of our truck [00:22:55][18.3]

**Scott Hanson:** [00:23:30] And it was just it was so surreal. And it wasn't even a big tree. It was a tabletop tree that she would put on a table. And so it didn't weigh very much. And we obviously didn't have a tie down at all. And as it blew out, it was sort of like in slow motion. You could just see the tree kind of going up in the air, in slow motion and landing in the middle of the freeway and the semi come and hit it. And it just basically disintegrated. [00:23:54][24.1]

**Taylor** [00:23:11] Did you tell her?

**Scott Hanson:** I don't think we told her for a while. I think maybe we. We kept that from her for a few years and finally said, Mom, remember that tree we brought back from Flagstaff? We didn't really bring it back from Flagstaff. [00:23:23][11.9]

**TAYLOR:** Scott is not the only one with a Christmas tree horror story. In fact I got a few stories from various people over the phone and on social media. And a lot of them started to sound like different renditions of National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation.

**Rusty Griswold [0:00 - 0:26]:** Dad, didn't they invent Christmas tree lots so people didn't have to drive all the way out to nowhere and waste a whole Saturday?!

**Audrey Griswold:** Ugh my toes are numb.

**Ellen Griswold:** Clark, Audrey's frozen from the waist down...

**Clark Griswold:** It's all part of the experience, honey!

**TAYLOR:** I spoke to one man on the phone who laughed about the time his grandfather was sawing a tree and all the snow from one of the branches came tumbling down onto his head, down his neck. Or another time when it was so cold out the saw snapped in half! My favorite story I heard came from another family. Meet Barrett and Jen Marson. They're married, and when you see them together, they're perfect. They talk over each other a lot but they're smiling and laughing all the while... That said, they're also very different. I sat down with both of them to get their story.

**Barrett Marson:** [00:01:37] I think it's important to know that I am an avid indoorsman. I am not a fan of nature and hiking and trees or animals. I don't do well in the outdoors. So it's an important thing to know. [00:01:52][15.1]

**TAYLOR:** But Jen comes from a family of hikers and outdoor enthusiasts. In fact, she grew up cutting her own tree down with her family. But one year, Jen was out of town. So Barrett had to take their kids with Jen's family without Jen.

**Taylor Seely:** [00:02:47] Did you try to get out of it at all? **Barrett Marson:** [00:02:48] I did not. I did not try to get out of it at all [00:02:51][3.4]

**TAYLOR:** At this point, Jen's jaw drops and they're both laughing. Clearly she remembers it differently.

**Barrett Marson:** [00:02:52] no, I was you know, I was resigned to going. I knew it was something that was an obligation when I married into the Sweeney family. I would have to do some things outside, much to my chagrin. [00:03:05]

**TAYLOR:** So fast forward to the trip itself...

**Barrett Marson:** [00:03:21] So, we ended up having to hike. Well, at least probably over a half mile into the forest. [00:03:28][7.2]

**TAYLOR:** Remember: avid indoorsman, folks.

**Barrett:** But so we go into the forest now. There's not a lot of trees either, you know, really, really big hundred year old trees or there's really small saplings, I think you'd call him right. Or whatever you call young trees. [00:03:55][15.3]

**TAYLOR:** There weren't many trees left because they went on one of the last weekends to cut them down. And like I mentioned earlier, the permits sell out fast. So Jen's family decide to go farther into the forest - they figure the farther they go, maybe they'll get a better tree. But there comes a point when it's too much for Barrett.

**Barrett Marson:** [00:04:28] And then all of a sudden, my brother in law and my son in law decided to sort of go down a ravine, a fairly steep ravine. I was having none of it. [00:04:38][9.6] [00:04:38] Hill. Oh, no. It was a ravine. It was pretty steep. I was there. You were not. It was pretty steep. And so I was like, no way. So I ended up picking a tree, [00:04:49][10.4][20.0] **Barrett:** [00:04:53] There weren't any full lush trees. [00:04:56][2.9]

**TAYLOR:** So basically, this was NOT like the part of Christmas Vacation when Clark Griswold finds THE TREE.

**Clark Griswold:** [0:38] There it is! \*holy music indicating perfect tree found\*

**TAYLOR:** And Jen was... well...

**Taylor:** [00:11:46] So tell me about when you first saw it, like your first literal reaction in person. [00:11:50][4.4] **Jen:** [00:11:51] So I was out of work. So I'm in for work. And I came home and I came in through the garage and I get into the living room and I was like, what? What is that? That's the tree. Like, that is the saddest looking tree. And it looks even sadder because it was very tall. So it was a taller trim. It was probably 10, maybe a little over 10 feet, but it was super scrawny. And so because of the height, like there was no it's the ornaments looked for. You couldn't put lights anywhere, like you tried

to wrap them around the tree trunk. But then that just looks ridiculous. I mean, it was a total disaster. [00:12:23]

**TAYLOR:** But even in *those* situations -- when you get stuck with the ugliest tree of the season -- Jen said it's *still* worth it to go out and cut a tree. And Barrett? Well, he still disagrees.

**Jen Marson:** [00:06:29] it's it's about the experience with the family, you weirdo. It's not just about like the manual labor of walking into the forest and cutting down a tree. It's been with the family and hanging out and watching the kids faces when they find the tree that they want to pick and all that stuff. [00:06:44][14.9] **BARRETT:** [00:06:44] And I must say, like, her family is wonderful to hang out with. But I can hang out with them in Glendale and have the same experience. <cue music> I could like, you know, we could sit and have a beer or hot chocolate in Glendale [00:06:56][11.7][26.7]

**TAYLOR:** I ASKED THEM THEIR VERDICT ON THE TREE-CUTTING DEBACLE...

**Barrett/ Jen at same time:** [00:17:41] We are the Marson family and we do (do not) recommend cutting down your own tree. [00:17:46][4.4]

<music fade out>

**TAYLOR:** Now one last thing I'll say about cutting down your own tree from the forest -- If you ever felt bad about doing it because maybe you felt like you were stealing from nature or ruining our national forests, think again. We actually need to thin our forests to prevent dangerous wildfires.

**Brady Smith:** [00:06:20] with the conditions that we have here, when we hear about people getting trees or trees and getting cut, it's a good thing. And those are the kind of things they were seeking to do because we're trying to restore these forests to a more natural condition to where it was in late eighteen hundreds, early nineteen hundreds. We have roughly a thousand trees per acre in northern Arizona forests and in healthy conditions it should be about 100 trees per acre. So the Christmas tree cutting is not going to make a significant dent, but it definitely is not going to harm the ecosystem in any way. It will help it, if anything. [00:07:02][42.3]

**Taylor:** So if you want to cut down a tree this year and need information on how to get a permit, we'll put the link in our show notes. Azcentral has a great, [informative article](#) explaining the process.

## *PART 2: Big box stores and local farms*

**TAYLOR:** But, if the thought of an ugly tree albeit with great memories afterward still isn't selling you... or if you can't get a permit in time, but you still want a real tree, you can get one.

The second way Arizonans get their Christmas tree is ... at a story.

You can turn to either a big-box store, like a Home Depot or Lowe's, OR you go to a local farm or nursery -- which often times sell their trees in parking lots or at churches!

Now, by doing this, you should know: You're NOT getting a locally-grown Christmas tree. The only way to get a truly local Christmas tree is to cut it from the forest, like Scott Hanson or the Marson family.

The trees from big-box stores or even the trees from local farms or nurseries come from out of state. But which states, you ask?

[0:00] \*rings, rings\* Christmas Tree Association. May I help you?

**Taylor:** To find out where most of them are from, I called the National Christmas Tree Association. --Yes, that really is a thing!

**Doug Hundley [7:57]** My name is Doug Hundley, and I'm a seasonal spokesperson for the National Christmas Tree Association.

**Doug Hundley [8:33]** For the last several years, Oregon has been the top producer of um, of Christmas trees.

**TAYLOR:** Doug said they sell anywhere between 4.5 and 5 million Christmas trees each season. And that their best-selling tree is the noble fir.

**Doug Hundley [9:09]** The next state that produces between 4 and 5 million is North Carolina. And our primary tree that we sell in North Carolina is Fraser Fir.

**TAYLOR:** Just putting it out there - that's my personal favorite.

**Doug Hundley [9:50]** The third state in production totals is in Michigan. ... And then Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. These are down around 1 million trees each.

**TAYLOR:** When I emailed the media contacts for Home Depot and Lowe's to find out where they get their trees, they confirmed what Doug said. Arizona Lowes stores sell Douglas Fir, Noble Fir and Grand Firs from Central Oregon. Home Depots gets their Arizona trees from The Kirk Company, located in Oregon, just south of Portland.

When I looked up a few local farms, like Valley View and Mother Natures Farm and Vertuccio Farms, they also said they got their trees from Oregon. And that made me kind of curious... why don't they just grow the trees themselves? Or.... get them from our national forests and sell them?

Well, as for the national forests, Brady from Coconino answered that question for me:

**Brady Smith:** [00:07:39] We don't plant trees for that purpose at all. You know, the national forests are public land, so we will designate certain areas to be used for the Christmas tree tree cutting program. But we're not like a tree farm ... and there's certain stipulations which are kind of outlined on the permit... We don't cultivate trees or grow them for the purpose of people cutting them down for Christmas trees. [00:08:22][42. 6]

**TAYLOR:** And Doug from the Christmas Tree Association told me this:

**Doug Hunley:** This is largely about where the trees can be grown. When you want a fir tree, that's one group of Christmas trees that are quite popular. They're grown in the northern, in the northwest and in the northeast. ... There's not hardly any firs grown south of there.

**TAYLOR:** Most of the trees grown in Arizona national are pine trees. We've got pinion pine and ponderosa pine... Brady told me we have a few FIR trees that grow too, but because of how dense our forests can get, that can sometimes lead to lanky trees that aren't as full and robust and beautiful as say... the tree-farm-grown Oregon trees.

**TAYLOR:** To figure out why our local farms don't just grow their own trees, I spoke to....

**Jayne Mitchell:** I am Jayne Mitchell, and I'm one of the owners of Tim Mitchell's Christmas Trees. It's our family business.

**TAYLOR:** Tim Mitchell's is a household name in Arizona.

**Jayne Mitchell:** We're all workers as well as owners.

**TAYLOR:** They had been selling Christmas trees from 1950 up until just a few years ago. Here's what Jayne Mitchell said about why Arizona farmers don't grow Christmas trees here.

**Jayne Mitchell:** They are grown on farms just like corn or wheat or tomatoes. They're only grown to be Christmas trees!

**TAYLOR:** So you can literally think of these trees as crops! Which means again: No guilt about cutting that tree down. It was grown for that purpose! But Jayne said Arizona's climate is unreliable for this type of farm.

**Jayne Mitchell:** Our wet weather is too sporadic. They'd have to have some kind of irrigation. Even in the north. Ours don't grow anywhere near as fast. They'd be a very old tree before they were seven or eight feet tall.

**TAYLOR:** So there you have it. <music fades in> Whether you already bought your tree, or you're going to soon, and you wonder to yourself: Where'd it come from? Well, chances are, it's from Oregon. Unless, of course, you cut it yourself from one of our national forests.

As for me, well I'll be enjoying my artificial tree this year to be honest. And yes, I'll be jealous of all of you who have real trees. Enjoy them, enjoy your friends and family and enjoy your holiday season.

<music fades out>

<theme music fades in>

**KAILA:** Well, that's it for today. If this episode has inspired you to go try to cut down your own tree, please let us know by tagging us on Twitter at @valley101pod. I need to know if it went well or if you climbed up a hill just to get a dinky tree. And in case you haven't noticed, we're approaching our 50th episode! It's right around the corner. So if you're enjoying this show, please let us know by leaving us a rating and a review on whatever app you use to listen to this podcast. As always, thanks for listening to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. See you next week.

<theme music fades out>

**KAILA (to Taylor):** Does that work?

**TAYLOR (squealing):** And HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!!

**KAILA (singing):** Happy Holidaaaays.

**TAYLOR (singing in a low tone):** HAPPY HOLIDAAAYSSSS.