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How the famous trees of Altadena's Christmas Tree Lane were saved in time for Christmas

Lights are on for 96th year and will continue each night through Jan. 2

By Steve Scauzillo, San Gabriel Valley Tribune

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ALTADENA >> Christmas arrived early on Santa Rosa Avenue this year.

When a [story in our newspapers ran in August](#) about an all-out effort to save dozens of the 150 deodar cedar trees that make up Christmas Tree Lane, the gifts started dropping like manna from heaven.

Green King Co., McWane International and Toro donated about \$3,700 worth of irrigation spikes, micro hoses, pipes and water meters that kept the trees alive, as well as the oldest, outdoor Christmas display in the world.

Last Saturday night, the trees brought over from the western Himalayas in 1885 by John P. Woodbury, the founder of Altadena, lit up the faces of thousands of children and adults during the 96th annual Christmas Tree Lane Lighting Ceremony.

Trees that were turning brown from the severe drought and punishing summer heat are sprouting new shoots and turning green. And thanks to a ton of new volunteers, strings of 14,000 colorful bulbs — some of them the new, less-energy intensive LED variety — shine from the boughs of these famous trees that for about a mile, create a Southern California-style wintery wonderland where families in cars ride under a canopy of towering pine trees draped in colorful holiday lights.

This year was especially difficult for the Christmas Tree Lane Association, a nonprofit made up of volunteers. After spending about \$7,000 this summer on fancy irrigation methods that brought water to the stressed trees, and another \$7,000 for new lights and other expenses, the nonprofit had nearly run out of cash.

“We had to notify our many members that we were not going to have a lighting ceremony. Because the money was spent on the trees,” said Tony Ward, first vice president and lane foreman. Sponsors, from deasy/penner, Proactive Property Management, Scott and Lori Webster of Hoopla, Zemrus Escrow and others chipped in about \$15,000, which helped pay for the ceremony held last Saturday.

It's an event that generates knots in his stomach every year, said Ward, a volunteer since 1971 who worries about the budget, the safety of the thousands who walk or drive the street and now, the health of the trees themselves, yet still enjoys the quiet, unique holiday spectacle.

“The expression on the kids' faces,” keeps him going. “When people see the lights go on and then you hear the oohs and aahs.”

Ward, a retired engineer from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, was happy to show off the new irrigation methods being used on about 17 percent of the famous trees facing imminent death last year,

according to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works Tree Maintenance Department.

Since August, the Association dug 36 dry wells and installed deep watering spikes that act like vertical drip irrigation when attached to micro-hoses. Meters measure water flow and ground absorption. Too often, the deodar cedars (*cedrus deodara*) would die from too much water from overwatering of lawns. The key is to follow watering by a 20-day dry period, he explained.

The county has added drip irrigation to two small pocket parks at Woodbury Road and Santa Rosa, said Mike Kaspar, spokesman for the Department of Public Works. Workers opened a water meter in the median that had been hidden for more than 40 years, Kaspar said.

Of the 26 sickly specimens lining Santa Rosa Avenue, only one most likely cannot be saved, Ward said.

“Twenty-five of the 26 have shown positive signs of recovery,” he said.. “With confidence I can say that.”

Ward points to new shoots coming from Tree No. 80 on the median near Calaveras Street near the most unhealthy trees in the lane. “This one is thinner, yes, but it has more foliage now,” Ward said.

When he walks the lane, it’s like he’s walking down his own driveway.

“You will see a lot of people here Christmas Eve,” Ward said. “A lot of the people will just walk it at night. That is a nice thing to see.”

The lights of Christmas Tree Lane (Santa Rosa Avenue between Woodbury Road and Altadena Drive) in Altadena are lit every night from dusk until midnight through Jan. 2. They are turned on for one night Jan. 6 to Jan. 7 for the Christian orthodox churches that celebrate Christmas on the Feast of the Epiphany.

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