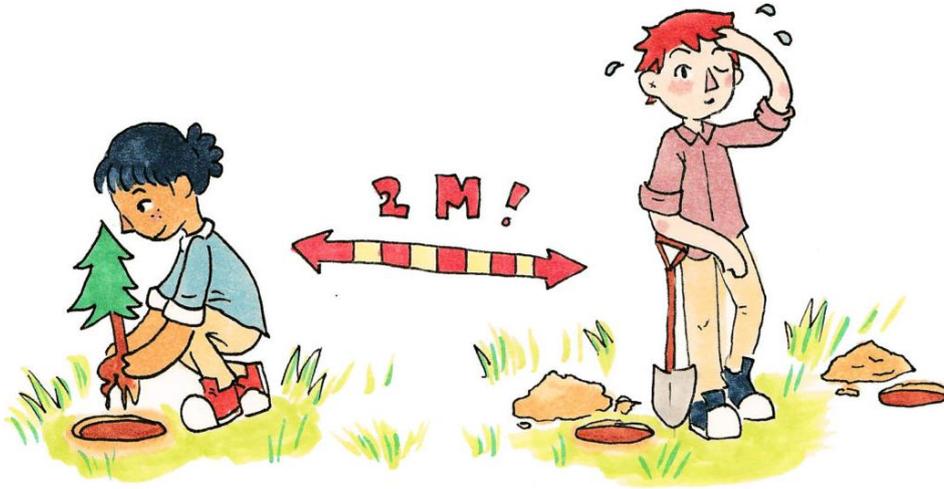


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5 000 tree planters prepare for a planting season despite COVID-19

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For the past four years, Levin Chamberlain has spent his summers tree planting in B.C.'s southern interior.

The routine has become special for Chamberlain, who graduated from UVic with a degree in Environmental Studies and Canadian History in 2018, and he grew up in the interior idolizing the dozens of planters that emerged from the nearby forests with sweat stains and dirt gushed across their gear.

"They seemed to be the heroes of the woods," says Chamberlain in an email interview with the Martlet before leaving for this year's season. "I was inspired by the rugged stigma that tree planting had. Especially growing up in the southern interior, I saw many tree planters being dropped off into civilization just covered with war wounds and dirt."

Chamberlain expects to travel to the southern interior, just north of Kamloops, in the beginning of May to plant for Brinkman Reforestation.

After a month of uncertainty on whether he would get the chance to return to the woods this summer amid the COVID-19 pandemic, B.C. approved a plan for approximately 5 000 tree planters from across the country to head to the province's interior last month — albeit with strict isolation and physical distancing regulations.

"We will all be in it together, side-by-side like before, just only two metres apart."

The season was delayed in March by chief forester and assistant deputy minister Diane Nichols until May 4. On April 24, the provincial government gave the go-ahead to the planting industry after agreeing to the strict isolation and physical distancing guidelines.

According to a report from the CBC News, tree planters will be assigned "work pods" with whom they will self-isolate, and will be banned from visiting adjoining communities or hosting large gatherings among other guidelines.

"There will be no balcony parties, no parking lot parties," said Jordan Tesluk of the BC Forest Council in an interview with the CBC. "Basically, you'll get fired if you don't follow the rules."

The rules come after concerns from community members in interior parts of the province about thousands of planters travelling to their communities from other parts of the country and potentially spreading the virus.

2020 was expected to be an intense summer for planters in B.C.'s interior.

Typically, the tree planting industry in B.C. employs around 4 500 workers; however, last fall in an effort to reforest trees that were burnt by the previous wildfire seasons, the province estimated they needed to plant 48 million more trees to replenish the forest. That work would require an additional 500 to 1 000 workers, and growing up to 48 million extra seedlings to plant.

Chamberlain acknowledges that there is anxiety associated with getting infected with COVID-19 or spreading the disease to other communities, but he remains confident that his peers will follow the measures put in place by the industry and by Provincial Health Authorities.

"This includes 14 days of self-isolating, a strict travel plan, and physical distancing within camps. Additionally, we are restricted from visiting towns on days off to lessen the risk of getting remote and large communities infected," said Chamberlain.

While tree planting is often associated with camaraderie and working together in small groups, it may be an adjustment to physically distance in camp. But Chamberlain believes the regulations could help bring the work pods closer together as they adjust to their new normal.

"Physical distancing in camp will be really difficult for us to get through, but with perseverance, I think it will eventually bring us all closer together," says Chamberlain. "Especially since we are typically away from our friends and family when we tree plant, the camp becomes that community we rely on."

With all the uncertainty in the world, disrupting plans for people across the globe, he's excited at the prospect of working alongside a group of tree planters from across the country — even if it has to be two metres apart.

"We will all be in it together, side-by-side like before, just only two metres apart," he said. "We will still be able to work, sit around the fire, and make even more blurry memories as a team, and if we are successful in staying healthy, then maybe we will have our own community restrictions lifted."

Source: <https://www.martlet.ca/tree-planters-covid-19/>