

located on rich Davidson soil, he does not fertilize, and he uses no sprays. Instead, he picks bag worms out of the trees by hand.

In June, he'll take three long weeks, seven days a week to "shear" the trees into their distinctive conical shape. And in fact, the trees at Elysium are so perfectly shaped, one is tempted to squeeze them to see if they're real. "Most people who have gone to a lot of different places say nice things about our trees," says Steve smiling like a Cheshire cat.

Regrettably, some people think they are so nice, they forget to pay for them on purpose. Poachers have hit both Bramblewood and Elysium, sometimes stealing several trees at a time. "I've got one guy; I'm pretty sure I know who he is, and I'm pretty sure he's stolen two trees," says Steve. He usually comes around dark on Sunday, just before they close. "We run a totally trusting business here, and we don't want to be in an untrusting mode with anything to do with Christmas," says this affable Midwesterner. "We've never had a bad check. We've had two that were bad, but they were both made good, and that's over 20 years selling trees."

Mike and Lisa Klaniecki of Fredericksburg came back to Elysium for their third year in a row, recently. Mike says Elysium trees "last so long after, you know, like last year we had it until like February." Lisa quickly adds, "We did take the ornaments down, though." Steve Satterfield has heard this before. As he helps the Klanieckis put their tree in a protective net for the drive home, he says, "If you keep it in water so that it never runs out, it'll last a long time." Once you get it home, "our recommendation would be to make a fresh cut, put it in water and don't let it run out...If it ever runs out, it rosin over right away and seals it right off and it's done for, unless you take it down and start over and cut it again. But most people don't want to un-decorate it."

Steve Satterfield has not heard Tucker Altman's advice for keeping trees fresh, which is to pour boiling hot water on the base. But he admits that might make sense because the hot water would dissolve the hardened rosin that is clogging the tree's pores.

Tucker Altman has sold Christmas trees for Kiwanis International at the Fireman's Fairgrounds on Caroline Street in Orange for the past 33 years. And



Photo by Phil Audibert

Mark Decot of Bramblewood Tree Farm grows four varieties of Christmas trees on a 60-acre tract along the Transcontinental Pipeline near where it crosses the Monrovia Road. The Department of Energy bio fuels researcher drives down to Orange County on weekends and camps in a travel trailer.

unlike Elysium and Bramblewood, who open their gates only on weekends, the Kiwanis sale happens every day from 10 a.m. till 8 p.m. from the Saturday after Thanksgiving to a few days after Christmas. Yes after Christmas; Tucker has sold Christmas trees on December 27, mostly to folks who went out of town for the holiday and now want to celebrate a second Christmas at home.

On Saturday, November 29, 500 Canaan, Concolor, Douglas Fir and regular fir trees left a farm near Bramblewood, Pennsylvania at 4 a.m. on board a tractor-trailer truck driven by Mike Willis. They arrived in Orange at 1:30 that afternoon, and they've been selling ever since. Tucker works the stand all weekend long and every evening, after he breaks free from his tire business

on Madison Road. "It's a helluva lot of work," he says wearily, but not as much as when they used to cut the trees themselves in West Virginia!

All told, once expenses are paid, the Kiwanis will raise \$24,000. "Most of it goes out to the community," says Tucker as he ticks off the various charitable organizations that are benefited: among others, Camp Holiday Trails, Toys for Tots, and the Christmas Shopping Tour where 75 kids receive \$75 apiece to buy Christmas presents for their friends and family. And that money stays here. "We try to keep it local," says Tucker. "This money is all going back into the community."

Tucker Altman has been doing this so long that buying a Christmas tree from him has become something of local holiday tradition passed down from generation to generation. Some families even ask him to pick out their tree for them. "I'm a permanent fixture," he shrugs, "a Christmas tradition."

And so, whether you buy a tree pre-cut from Kiwanis or Miller Farms or from out front of the various grocery stores or other retail outlets in the area, or you cut one yourself on the farm, don't be concerned about the fact that a tree had to be sacrificed to properly mark the birth of Christ. Mark Decot says "a lot of people are concerned that you're cutting down a perfectly good tree. I say 'don't worry about it. It made space for another one. I'll just plant another one. That's what life's all about.'"

He zips up his coat against the chill damp air. "Christmas is all about life and getting out and breathing the fresh air and bringing a tree into the house. And it's always a nice experience for the kids to see a tree coming in through the door."



Photo by Phil Audibert

When you buy a tree at Elysium, you get free hot cider and Jo Satterfield's homemade cookies. The cookies were featured on a PBS show about the "Best of Virginia Farms" cook book and tour.

Oh Tannenbaum, Oh Tannenbaum, wie treu sind deine Blater

Oh Christmas Tree, Oh Christmas Tree, thy leaves are so unchanging (twice)

Du grunst nicht nur zur Sommerzeit

Not only green when summer's here

Nein auch im Winter wenn es schneit

But also when it's cold and drear

Oh Tannenbaum, Oh Tannenbaum, wie treu sind deine Blater

Oh Christmas Tree, Oh Christmas Tree, thy leaves are so unchanging

It is only too appropriate that we begin a story about Christmas trees with a German folk song, because the tradition of cutting a live evergreen and setting it up inside the home at Christmastime comes from Germany.

"In a land of forests the tree seems more in place; it is a kind of sacrament linking mankind to the mysteries of the woodland," reads a book entitled, Christmas Customs and Traditions: Their History and Significance by Clement A. Miles. Published in 1976 this Dover edition is based on Christmas in Ritual and Tradition, Christian and Pagan, by T. Fisher Unwin, originally published in 1912.

This book tells us that the first mention of a Christmas tree appears in 1605. The unknown author writes, "At Christmas they set up fir-trees in the parlours at Strasburg and hang thereon roses cut out of many coloured paper, apples, wafer, gold foil, sweets, etc." The Christmas tree, or Weinachtsbaum, is mentioned again in a mid 17th century catechism, and again in 1737, and it is generally believed the tradition started in the Protestant north of Germany and was passed on to the Catholics.

And, it did not originate in the homes of peasants whom one might assume would be more oriented towards pagan ritual. Instead, it first appeared in the homes of the well-to-do in towns and villages. The story that Martin Luther started the tradition when he returned from a walk outside on a midnight clear and put candles on an evergreen to simulate the stars he had just seen in the heavens, is just that... a story.

The Christmas tree first appeared in France in 1840. During the 1890 holiday season, 30,000 cut trees were sold on the streets of Paris. It is also mentioned in 18th century England, but did not come into general use there until the mid-19th century.

The origins of decking the house with fresh greenery in the middle of winter go back much further, to the Roman custom of the Kalends of January. And you might make an argument that bringing a live tree into the house stems from Adam, his apple and the Tree of Life.



Oh Tannenbaum



Photos by Susie Audibert

Above, Tucker Altman has volunteered at the Kiwanis Christmas tree lot next to the Orange fire department every year since 1975. Proceeds from the sale of trees go to numerous local charities. Top photo, it takes a lot of work to make a perfect Christmas tree. This eight-foot tall specimen took 12 years to reach this height. Every summer, Steve Satterfield carefully mows around the trees, picks bag worms by hand, and shears each tree to its distinctive conical shape.

"Christmas is all about life"

When you think about it, it is a rather odd tradition, this cutting down of a living tree, dragging it out of its natural environment, setting it up in an overheated house, and festooning it with all manner of lights, baubles and gee-gaws. There it stands like some pagan sacrifice, with riches laid at its feet, until after the holidays when it loses its magic and is coldly tossed out the back door into the trash.

Few days of the year are more uplifting than the day when it comes into the house, smelling of fresh evergreen. Few days are more depressing than when it comes out three weeks or so later, all dead, brittle and forlorn. If there ever was a symbol that the holidays are over, of winter's barren hopelessness, it's that dead tree lying on the burn pile or out on the sidewalk. No wonder the suicide rate increases in mid-winter. If we can just make it to Valentines Day, we'll be okay.

It's a good thing that when they changed the calendar in 1752, they moved Christmas back 12 days from January 5 to within four days of the shortest day of the year. The druids had already noticed that daylight had stopped its terrifying march towards eternal darkness; that it was actually getting marginally brighter. There was a glimmer of hope.

BY



Left to right, Mike and Lisa Klaniacki of Fredericksburg discuss their options, make a decision, cut down the tree, carry it back to their car, and drive back to the shed to have it netted. Last year, by keeping the base constantly immersed in water, their Elysium tree stayed fresh well into February.

Photos by Susie Audibert

The Christians saw it too. Always adept at dovetailing the faith with pagan ritual, myth and superstition, it may or may not be coincidence that a celebration of life happens to fall on such a dead time of the year.

"Christmas is all about life," says Mark Decot (DEE-coh) one dreary frigid Saturday morning as he waits for customers to roll into his modest Bramblewood Christmas tree farm off Monrovia Road. "The whole idea of bringing a live tree into the house at Christmastime; you've got the connection with Jesus Christ and living and life and then you've got the whole issue of December being a cold and dead time of year."

Decot is an interesting guy. He has owned this practically landlocked 60-acre tract along the Transcontinental Pipeline since 1981. A former extension agent and a forester by training, he lives and works in the Washington metropolitan area, where he researches bio fuels for the Department of Energy. That includes looking at lignocellulose as an energy source...fuel from woodchips. "It's sustainable, plus it's something that you can control locally with your local resources and provide jobs," he says.

On weekends this quiet unassuming man drives down here to get away from it all and grow lignocellulose for a different energy source, one more spiritual than physical in nature. And isn't it ironic that a man who grows Christmas trees is also trying to wean us off an energy source that comes from near where Christ was born? But that's a whole other story, and we'll resist being led down that sidetrack today.

No, on this particular Saturday, Mark Decot is alone; his wife and child "went to give food to the hungry." He'll spend the night huddled by the wood stove in an ancient travel trailer he's pulled underneath the loblolly pines at the edge of the pipeline. With no electricity or running water, he has to pack in everything he needs in the back of his battered economy-sized pickup and drive in

the mile-long, one-lane rutted forest track to his tree farm. "Some families come year after year. Some kids come and they bring their kids, and they were little kids when we started here," says Mark, adding he might sell just 50 trees this season.

But that's okay. "It pays the taxes, you know, and gives me a chance to come out here and visit with people." He's actually lowered prices to \$20 for a six-foot high tree "because of the econ-

Orange County's other Christmas tree farm is called, Elysium, which Webster's describes as "any place or state of perfect happiness; paradise." Steve and Jo Satterfield have been growing trees here since 1982. "We have a lot of customers who come for years and they expect to visit with us a half an hour, at least," smiles Steve patiently. "So, they linger, and we like that... generally."

Their busiest day ever; they sold 107 trees, just he and Jo. Now they have help: neighborhood teenagers who will tote a tree to your car or wield the saw that Steve and Jo will lend you. "Occasionally a few people get here and this wasn't their thing. They go, 'I don't know how to cut down a tree,'" says Steve, adding that some customers are "just fussy, from the word go, but that's like two or three a year."

For the vast majority, cutting a live tree at Elysium or Bramblewood, is an authentic holiday tradition to be cherished and passed down from generation to generation. No artificial anything here; no traffic jam, no one-upmanship masked as generosity, no holiday guilt trip, no hard sell commercial assault, no pickpockets figurative or literal, no clanging bells, no flashing neon.

It's quiet, peaceful, albeit a little chilly on this windswept hilltop. Here you can look out on the

mountains and discuss the merits and faults of various trees, and lose track of the ones you were considering and let yourself be distracted by others. And once you've made this democratically-arrived-at choice, you kneel (genuflect?) at the base and saw furiously, huffing and puffing as the saw blade binds in the wood. And then you drag this thing back to the car, your hands all sticky with sap and stung by green needles.

Back at the shed, in front of the 10-foot high Austrian Pine, you marvel at the magnificently restored sleigh that Steve Satterfield's grandfather used to deliver the mail in northern Illinois at the turn of the last century. Howzat for an authentic Currier and Ives moment? And then take a sip from that steaming cup of hot cider and help yourself to one more of Jo's outstanding homemade cookies, the same cookies that, not long ago, stole the limelight on a PBS program about "The Best of Virginia Farms" cookbook and tour.

"The kids don't remember the tree, but they remember the cookie," Steve rolls his eyes incredulously. And it's not just kids...old folks, middle aged folks, childless couples remember cookies and tree cutting too. And how about the regular customer who came one year, nine months pregnant, "and got like a 12 or 13-foot white pine, by herself, she was heavily pregnant,

hustled it on this little car herself and hauled it home. And she said she had 12 people for Christmas and the tree was the hit of the day."

No wonder Steve Satterfield says "There's no easy way out of the business. You start to get the sense of responsibility. People see we're getting a little long in the tooth. Well, how long are you going to keep doing this?" If the Satterfields stop, just think of all those disappointed kids from one to 92. "People's Christmas traditions are



Steve Satterfield (left) tugs a Christmas tree through a device that binds the branches in red and white netting. The netting protects the tree from wind damage on the ride home.

Photo by Phil Audibert

you're always eight years away from doing something else. The Satterfields hope younger neighboring landowners will absorb the business from them, but they'll have their work cut out for them. There's more to growing Christmas trees, in the Satterfield's case between 7,000 and 8,000 of them, than you might think. Besides the fact that he has a refreshing self-deprecating sense of humor and a wife who knows which of his ideas are hair-brained and which actually have promise, Steve Satterfield comes eminently qualified to run a Christmas tree farm. He's a forester and an economist. In fact he used to be the national budget director for the U.S. Forest Service in Washington before retiring here.

Since they started this in 1982, they have planted two-year-old seedlings every year in early March. At this point, they are four to eight inches high, and "they kind of languish at that size for five years or so." Then, for some reason, "they get it going," growing as much as 30 inches a year.

"For 15 years we'd have 85 to 90 percent survival," says Steve, adding "the last 10 years, we've had so many droughty periods that survival has gotten to be a real issue." In fact they don't advertise anymore for that very reason: "too many droughty periods; you get like three a year; the first one kind of weakens things, and the next one weakens a little more, then if you get that early fall one, it kind of finishes the job." For this reason, Elysium may be sold out of ready-to-cut trees this coming weekend.

The Satterfields grow six varieties: the sturdy Scotch pine, the slow-growing Blue Spruce, the delicate White Pine, the Douglas Fir, the Austrian Pine, and the tangerine-scented Concolor. From May to June, Steve will carefully mow grass, not just between the row, but close around the trees to keep critters, from voles to deer, from nesting in, nibbling and girdling seedlings. Because he is



Steve Satterfield's grandfather used this sleigh to deliver the mail in Northern Illinois at the turn of the last century. It now sits, fully restored, at Elysium Christmas Tree Farm off of Clark's Mountain Road.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Christmas tree farms in Orange County

•BRAMBLEWOOD TREE FARM

17157 Oak Shade Road
Orange, VA 22960
703-426-9191
Open 9 a.m. till dark, weekends only, Thanksgiving to Christmas. Closed Christmas Eve

Directions: From the town of Orange, take Route 20 north. Turn right on Rt. 612 (Monrovia Road) and go six miles to Henry's Store on the right. Go another 1.2 miles on Rt. 612 and turn right onto Rt. 662 (Oak Shade Road). At the dead end, just keep going straight, following the "Tree" signs. Be advised, it's a narrow, bumpy dirt track, but it's worth the drive.

•ELYSIUM TREE FARM

21041 Clarks Mountain Road
Rapidan, VA 22733
540-672-4512
Open 1 p.m. till dark, Fridays, and 9 a.m. till dark Saturdays and Sundays. Closed Christmas Eve

Directions: From the town of Orange, take Rt. 615 (Rapidan Road) out about five miles. Turn right onto Rt. 627 (Clark's Mountain Road). Go another 2.5 miles and turn right at the Christmas tree banner. Or, from Unionville, follow Rt. 617 (Everona Road) around until it becomes Rt. 627 (Clark's Mountain Road). Go three miles to the tree farm on the left.

•MILLER FARMS MARKET

12101 Orange Plank Rd.
Locust Grove, VA 22508
540-972-2680
Open Monday through Saturday 9 a.m. till 5 p.m. Closed Sundays

Directions: From Orange, take Rt. 20 north for 12 miles. Turn right on Rt. 621 (Orange Plank Road). Go eight miles to Miller Farms on the left. Or, from Wilderness, go east on Rt. 3. Two miles past the Rt. 20/Rt. 3 intersection, turn right onto Rt. 613 (Brock Road). At crossroads, turn right onto Rt. 621 (Orange Plank Road), three miles to Miller Farms on right. Although they don't actually grow their own, their trees come "from our cousins at Willow Springs Tree Farm in Christiansburg."