

Ambassador the Shire horse and his owner, woodsman Steven Jones, bring in the Christmas tree harvest from the plantation.

# THE *Tree* FARM

Get the festive season off to a great start by picking out your own locally grown Christmas tree

PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT  
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**D**ecember, and Christmas Tree Farm near London is at its busiest, with majestic Shire horse Ambassador bringing in freshly felled Christmas trees from the plantation, so that you can choose your perfect specimen.

And that's how the story began - a small boy insistent on choosing his very own tree every year. Each Christmas, John Matthews would drag his long-suffering parents on a journey in search of his perfect tree.

Later, as a student, they helped him finance 100 trees. He chose his one and sold the remaining 99. Each year, he bought more and more trees, before persuading his brother Robert to go into partnership with him. They now have their very own 120 acre 'Christmas Tree Farm', where they grow more than 120,000 trees. This year will be their 20th. ▶

They farm sustainably - 1,600 new trees are planted each March, more than replacing every Christmas tree cut the previous season. Robert explains how the British-grown trees are both green and good for the environment. 'Far less fuel is used to transport British-grown trees than European imports, and each tree both fixes carbon dioxide given off by cars and planes, and produces the daily oxygen needs for almost 20 people.' If disposed of properly, real biodegradable trees can be recycled, unlike most artificial, manufactured trees, which are produced on the other side of the world and destined for landfill.



Each Christmas tree is measured and priced according to its height and variety.

### GROWING NEEDS

It takes eight years for a tree to achieve a saleable Christmas height. Taller ones take even longer. The brothers buy in two- to three-year-old plantlets that are 15-20cm tall from a specialist British propagator. These are systematically transplanted out in rows in cleared ground, or they are used to plug gaps in 'forested' areas.

Young trees are vulnerable to damage by rabbits, squirrels and deer, as well as rampant woodland weeds. Later, they risk aphid or mite attacks, and difficulty if the weather swings from drought to deluge. The brothers respond accordingly, fencing, weeding and watering.

In summer, trees are identified and marked up for the annual fell, giving a

selection of sizes and types to meet customer expectations. John, connoisseur of the most desirable Christmas tree, does this job.

### CHRISTMAS HARVEST

The harvest is a hectic time. 'The whole family is flat out, combining heavy-duty logistics with an exciting customer retail experience,' explains Robert. Felling begins in late November, heralded by the annual arrival of Steven Jones and his two forestry working Shire horses, Ambassador and Thomas. Steven is an expert tree-feller who works tirelessly with his chainsaw to bring in more than 1,000 trees before

Christmas. The impressive Shire horses may draw the crowds, but they also carry weighty loads in with much less damage to the land than machinery would cause, especially in wet weather conditions. 'Snow is the worst,' says Robert. 'We're all for a white Christmas, but not until late on Christmas Eve!'

Trees are 'graded' by height and variety; colour-coded accordingly for ease of selection; and netted on purchase, if required, for ease of transport. Christmas Tree Farm Shop provides everything else you might need for your tree, including lights, ornaments and even traditional tinsel, but, most importantly, a stand, not only to hold it firm, but also to hold water.

Robert recommends that you treat your tree like you would cut flowers - once in water, the freshly cut trunks will drink in water through capillary action. 'They will take up to two to three pints a day once they are indoors. This will keep them fresher, with less needle drop, for longer.'

A visit to a Christmas tree farm like this makes for a memorable beginning to the seasonal festivities, and by choosing a freshly cut local tree, and taking Robert's advice, you can ensure you don't spend your whole Christmas vacation vacuuming up those pesky needles...

**Christmas Tree Farm, Chesham HP5 1NE.**  
**Tel: +44 (0)1494 794031. To find out more, go to [www.christmastreefarm.co.uk](http://www.christmastreefarm.co.uk)**

## CHRISTMAS TREE VARIETIES

**Christmas trees are widely categorised as drop and non-drop trees, referring to how long they keep their needles. Non-drop trees include firs, pines and some spruces.**

### BLUE SPRUCE

The most popular trees are spruce. Although they drop needles, they are the quickest to grow, which makes them cheaper to buy. The blue spruce is often a lovely sea-green/blue colour, with a really Christmassy fragrance.

### NORWAY SPRUCE

This tree has a multitude of green, sharp, pin-like needles on slender branches. Smaller specimens can be bought potted (up to 1.8m tall). They can then be planted out immediately after Christmas.

### GRAND FIR

Robert's favourite, this type has branched ends to its boughs, which makes it perfect for hanging decorations. There is an added bonus to this tree, as its crushed needles actually smell of oranges.

### NORDMAN FIRS

These are the best-known non-drop variety, with dark green needles and a wide, conical, almost dumpy habit, broad at the base, tapering quickly away at the top. The Fraser Fir is better in small spaces.

### SCOTS PINE

This pine has long, shaggy needles and is a soft and feathery olive green. This fulsome, bushy specimen is the best at hanging onto its needles and has a brilliant, rich pine fragrance. ♦