

Farm caters to pining families

Size, shape affect choice

By Alan Phelps

Senior Editor

On a blustery, gray November day, Dennis Lueder wandered through the Pinecrest Christmas Tree Farm near Blue Springs. His wife, Beryl, led the way, far ahead of Lueder and their grandson, Dusty.

"We're so confused," Lueder said, a small army of 6- to 8-foot Scotch pines camping on the hillside around him.

As Beryl Lueder inspected tree after tree, Dennis Lueder spoke of how his family, like the many others who come here annually, has made the 25-acre, 25,000-tree farm a 15-year Christmas tradition.

"My wife likes the trees down here. We argue, fight, look and look until we get so disgusted we just take something," he said. "But it's kind of fun."

The Lueders are the type of customers Charles and Barbara MacLean, owners of one of the state's oldest surviving tree farms, enjoy. Charles MacLean, a retired U.S. Department of Agriculture soil conservation worker, and his wife planted their first Christmas trees in 1964. Since then, the business 15 miles south of Beatrice literally has been growing as the MacLeans planted more trees and bought more acres.

"It's my life," Charles MacLean said.

While the Lueders and others searched for that special tree, MacLean drove his pickup around the farm, cutting down selections. Many of MacLean's customers pick out a tree far in advance of cutting time. Some stop by closer to the holidays and take their trees with them.

"A lot of families have made this a family tradition," MacLean said. "Some of them never miss. They come here every year."

One of MacLean's favorite customers, he said, is a woman who picks out 15 or 20 trees a year for her friends.

"She makes a two- or three-day effort out of it. She has a ball."

The pine trees that make their way into customer's homes have been watched over carefully by the MacLeans. About 5,000 trees are planted every year. During the next six years of a tree's life, the MacLeans prune and limit growth to one foot annually to nudge the tree into the conical Christmas shape.

Only about one-fourth of the seedlings planted will ever see ornaments. Others die or are used to make wreaths. Once purchased, the trees are stripped of dead branches, shaken down and baled up with wire for the customer to take home. It costs about \$30 for a farm-fresh Pinecrest tree, Barbara



MacLean said, depending on size and how closely the tree fits the ideal shape.

"They're kind of like people," Charles MacLean said. "You got tall people, you got short people."

Size seemed to be one of the deciding factors for those meandering through the branches.

Lee and Marlene Snyder of Beatrice, both graduate students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, strolled the hillside with their son, Kevin.

"We have a fun time arguing," Lee Snyder said.

"Kevin looks for the tallest, I look for the right shape and dad looks to see if we can afford it," Marlene Snyder clarified.

Dennis Lueder also cited size as an important part of the decision.

"My wife always gets something too big," he said. "That's what we usually argue about. Then we can't get the angel or something on top of it."



Clockwise from top: Ten-year-old Dusty Smith hauls some branches as he helps his grandparents search for the perfect tree at the Pinecrest Christmas Tree Farm, near Blue Springs. Lee Snyder, a graduate student at UNL, wanders through the farm's hundreds of trees searching for the perfect Christmas tree. Melvin "Shorty" Ames, a Pinecrest worker, cleans the dead branches from a tree before it is wrapped and sent off to be decorated for the holiday.

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