

Needle Hunt

Choose the Right Tree

On the day after Thanksgiving, as usual, the temporary Christmas-tree lots will open; so will the choose-and-cut tree farms. Some big national chains, like Home Depot, have already started selling trees.

Chain stores sell varieties that are "plantation-grown," says David Shaw, a farm advisor with San Diego County's Cooperative Extension, whose specialty, among others, is Christmas trees.

Plantation? It sounds like the Old South. In fact, some trees, like Scotch pines and yellow pines, are from the South, says Shaw, although most others are grown in Oregon and Washington, as well as the Midwest.

"Noble firs are your standard

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Christmas tree from the northern lands," says Shaw. "And they can

bring those in really cheap. About two years ago, their prices started to rise, which is good for growers here, because that sends more people to the choose-and-cut places, and there's a number of them in the county."

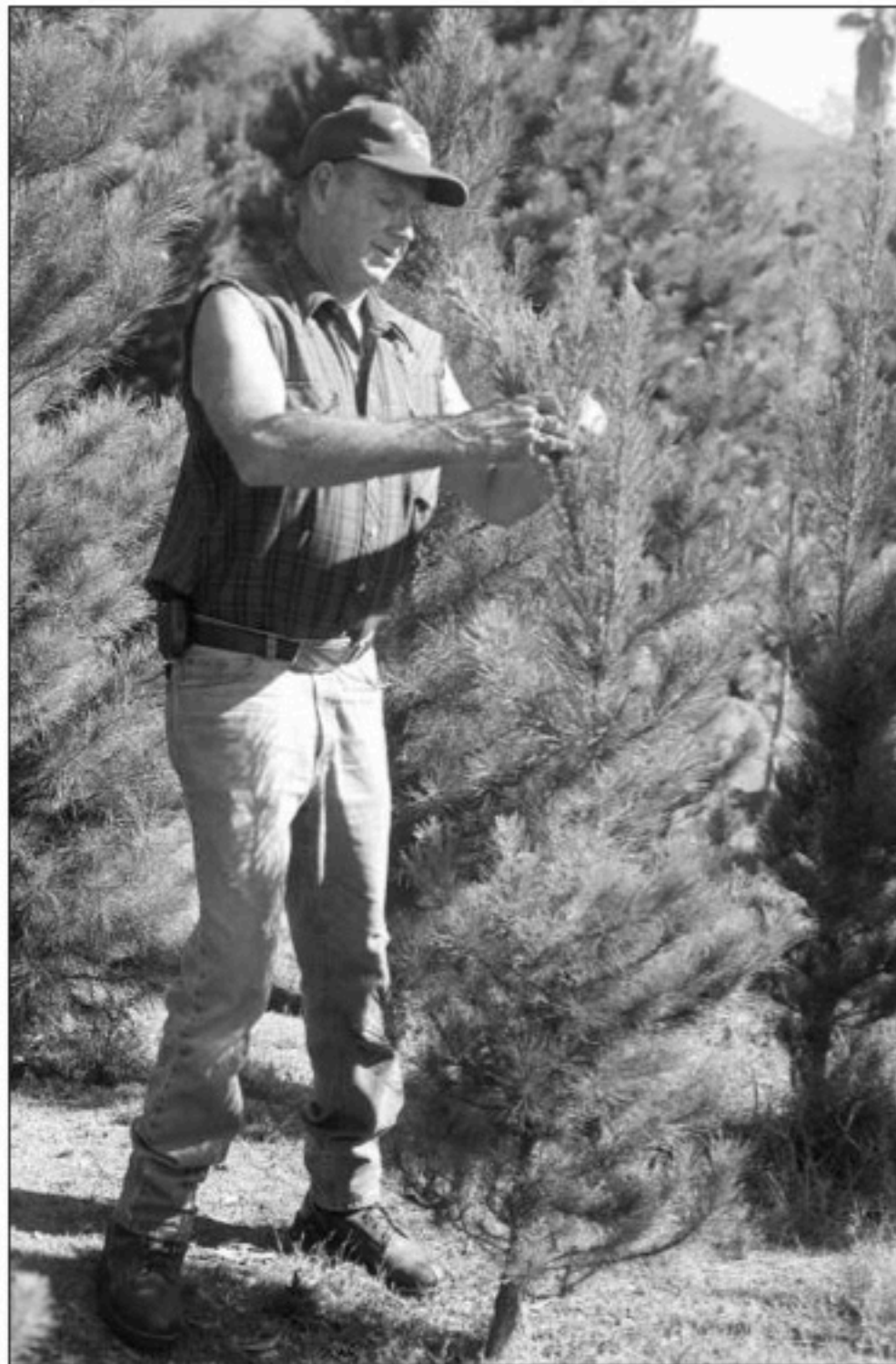
Lately, the Fraser fir has become a popular choice for growers. "That's an East Coast tree," says Jerry Klima. "It's not indigenous to our area, but it grows well here."

Klima, owner of ABC Tree Farms in Portland, Oregon, has to get out of the wind to speak on his cell phone. When he calls back, he says he's currently growing half a million Christmas trees, 40,000 to 50,000 of which he'll ship this season to retailers and temporary lots around the country, a dozen of them in San Diego. He also supplies three local outlets that carry the ABC Tree Farms name, including the one at the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

Still, his operation is relatively small, compared to the Home Depot-supplying plantations.

What Nobles and Frasers like and need is rain, says Klima. "In the Oregon and Washington area, we've had pretty heavy rains for the last month, so the trees look great. We've probably had one of the best years for moisture. Particularly in Washington, it's been nonstop rain and really cold weather."

Klima knows he's stating an irony, considering the fires, which he watched on TV. Alan House watched live, from his home and choose-and-cut tree farm



Alan House

in Alpine. One might suppose that a tree farm would be in the greatest jeopardy from a blaze. But that's not necessarily the case. "The fire affected the outer perimeters of the farm," says House, whose two acres is called House Evergreen Forest. "I lost 120 trees and 30 seedlings, due to the heat. But the fire did not burn any trees. They suffered from the heat. They toasted but didn't burn." Nor did his home. "That's because I keep the trees watered."

And so he has trees available, same as always. "I usually sell 200 trees, easily," says House.

House grows Monterey pine. That's what all the choose-and-cut places offer. Northerners don't grow them. "It's a warm-temperature tree," says Klima. "It's indigenous to the area around Carmel. It's not a common Christmas tree anywhere else but in California."

As for another native, the Coulter pine, says Klima, "They grow rapidly but have poor 'keepability.'" Keepability: a measure of how long a cut tree stays green, once cut and brought inside.

Shaw of the Extension Service says it's not fair to compare Montereys with Coulters, because lots of genetic work

has been done on the former. "As they are now, the Coulters go into what we call 'adult habit' much sooner than the Montereys. Adult habit means it's more leggy and open. You'll see big gaps between their branch whorls. And most people don't want that for their Christmas tree. They'd rather have a nice, full, conical tree" — like the Monterey.

The Monterey has another advantage, according to Shaw. "It probably has more fresh pine smell than something you buy that is cut and brought in."

Shaw gets lots of calls from people who say, "I have five acres. What should I do with it? And there's no real good answer to that." That's because the answer has more to do with marketability than keepability. "It's the old adage: 'If you can sell ice cream to Eskimos...'"

Growing small, potted Christmas trees is an alternative to running a choose-and-cut farm. "The ones that are grown here for that purpose are stone pines," says Shaw, "and they look very nice" — at least at first. "If you don't water them enough, they go into stress; and if you leave them in the container too long, the roots can circle and girdle the plant."

But if you plant a stone pine in your yard, choose the spot wisely, to say the least. "The stone pine — you can look at the ones growing in La Jolla, along the coastline — has a big, big bushy top. They're very nice juvenile trees, but they get probably 25 or 30 feet tall and that much or even more across."

— Jeanne Schinto

For preharvested trees only:

ABC Tree Farms
Del Mar Fairgrounds
2260 Jimmy Durante Boulevard
Del Mar
9:00 a.m.–9:00 p.m., daily
Info: 858-509-5187

For pre harvested, choose-and-cut, and potted varieties:

Family Christmas Tree Farm
300 Pepper Drive, El Cajon
9:00 a.m.–9:00 p.m., daily
Info: 619-448-5331

For choose-and-cut trees only:

House Evergreen Forest
3036 North Victoria Drive, Alpine
8:00 a.m.–sunset, seven days
Info: 619-445-8300 or
619-659-9788
www.cachristmas.com/SanDiego.html

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