

PHOTO ESSAY

PURSUIT *of the* PERFECT PINE *(or fir, or spruce, or cypress)*

The best family traditions don't come ready-made. They're hard-won, full of promise, but messy — just like the holidays. A Christmas tree hunt in the North Carolina mountains is no exception.

WRITTEN BY GRAHAM AVERILL

An army of teenage boys in Carhartt overalls ride around the tree farm on four-wheelers, eager to help families looking for the perfect Christmas tree. It's a simple process: You hike through the farm, point to the conifer you want, and one of the teenagers cuts it down, drags it to the tree baler, and then loads it onto your car. It's a pretty sweet setup. The 16-year-olds get carte blanche to use chainsaws and off-road vehicles, and you get a Christmas tree without having to get your hands dirty.

But I'm dragging my wife and 7-year-old son and daughter through the steep slopes of Sandy Hollar Farms specifically to get our hands dirty. My wife and I are trying to solidify our family's

Christmas tree tradition, and imprint a specific image on our kids' brains so that when they're 40, and they tell their own children about Christmas, they'll remember hiking deep into the woods in search of the perfect tree. They'll remember the smell of fresh-cut wood. Most importantly, they'll remember their father chopping that tree down with his own two hands.

OK, that's the image *I* want to imprint on my kids. My wife is all too eager to let the Carhartt army help. We've been together for 22 years, and she knows that if I pick up a tool, there's a good chance I'll get hurt. But I'm not willing to let some kid steal my glory, so I ask one of them if I can take a handsaw and cut the tree down myself. "Uh, sure," he says. "Just come and wave me down when you need help."



PHOTOGRAPH BY SARA BRENNAN

At Christmas tree farms throughout the mountains, the search is on for a Santa-worthy evergreen.

Sandy Hollar sits in a legitimate “holler” in the farm community of Leicester, 30 minutes outside of Asheville. Steep slopes rise immediately from either side of a gravel road and creek, with neat rows of Fraser firs rising with the slopes. It’s a working farm, with longhorn cattle, lambs, even the occasional Great Pyrenees, and you get to ride on the back of a tractor to reach the stands of trees, passing goats, chickens, sheep, and llamas along the way.

Short of hiking into a national forest and committing a felony by chopping down a random evergreen, this is as authentic an experience as you can get, which is exactly what June and Curtis Hawkins had in mind as they slowly developed their 200-acre family farm into a four-season agricultural destination. Curtis grew up on the farm, and his family has been growing Christmas trees since 1969. Today, guests can pick the farm’s blackberries, raspberries, apples, peaches, or pumpkins depending on the season.

“We do a little bit of everything,” says June, who spends most of her time taking care of the animals. “Sometimes it’s hard, other days it’s just not easy. But I love talking to the guests, answering their questions. We’re a working farm, but the trees have become a large piece of what we do.”

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someone in our family
of four will yell,
“This is the one!”*

The specific tree we’re looking for needs to be svelte and short. There isn’t a lot of room for indoor foliage in our tiny house if we still want to be able to walk through the living room. We crest one hill of perfect evergreens only to see another hill with

even more perfect specimens. It’s grove after grove of potential, and every 30 seconds someone in our family of four will yell, “This is the one!” and we’ll all converge on the tree to admire it, but ultimately, find its flaw. One’s a little too fat. Another has a bald spot. This is what online dating must be like: Everything looks good from a distance, but once you get an honest look, you can see the toupee.

OUR FAMILY DOESN’T HAVE A CHRISTMAS TREE tradition. The closest we’ve ever come to a steady custom was during graduate school, when I’d walk across the street to the grocery store, buy the cheapest tree in the parking lot, and carry it back to our apartment on my shoulder. Typically, the needles would start to fall off before we could get the decorations hung.

Now that we have kids, we’re in search of a more wholesome scenario, driving deep into the mountains to a different tree farm each year — a perennial search for the perfect farm, the perfect cup of hot cider, the perfect Santa Claus. Each farm has been different, from the trees to the snacks in the warming huts. Last year, the farm was beautiful,

but the Santa was lackluster, sporting a fake beard and eating a carton of Chinese takeout. About the only consistency from year to year is that my daughter throws up on the mountain roads on the way home from bagging the tree. Is that a tradition?

Honestly, the details didn’t seem to matter much when the kids were little. They were too young to know if we got the tree from the corner store. But they’re older now, and they’re going to remember this Christmas. It’s as if all of the other Christmases leading up to this point were just scrimmages.

Now we’re keeping score.

So I made the family dress like lumberjacks — flannels and stiff jeans and work boots. We look ridiculous because it’s one of those balmy, 62-degree December days. Heat stroke might be what my kids remember from this Christmas tree experience.

Eventually, we find “the one.” It’s short enough to fit in our one-story house and skinny enough to allow for a certain amount of movement through the living room. We’ll need to walk sideways past the couch, but we can make it work.

Cutting down the tree, though, isn’t as simple as it looks.

U-pick doesn’t have to mean U-hike. Instead of trudging among the firs, Sandy Hollar Farms offers rides to find your tree.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES HARRIS

I HAVE A HARD TIME EVEN REACHING THE TRUNK because it's so full at the bottom, but I don't want to kneel on the ground for fear of getting my lumberjack pants muddy. (They're new.) Eventually, I wrestle my way to the base of the tree, getting sap in my ear, and go to work on the trunk in earnest.

The saw is dull and rusty, and progress is slow. It's a spindly little trunk, too, which makes me wonder how actual lumberjacks do it. I take breaks and sweat a lot. There is some colorful language. I ask my wife if she brought water and snacks. She did not. It becomes obvious that flannel was the wrong choice. It's possible that when the kids retell this story, there will be a dramatic turn of events that involves cardiac arrest.

The kids do their part by shouting "3-2-1 timber!" over and over, while I struggle to work through the trunk. My wife offers to get one of the teenagers with the chainsaws, but I wave her off. I'll be damned if the retelling of our Christmas tree tradition includes outsourcing the labor.

Eventually, I break through the trunk, the tree slumping to the ground as the kids yell "timber!" one last time. My hands are sticky and caked with mud. Sap has worked its way into my beard and I've sweated through my flannel, but I insist on carrying the tree down the mountain on my shoulder. I walk toward the tractor like a hunter carrying a prize buck out of the woods, my head held high as I pass the teenagers sitting idly on their four-wheelers.

There's a lot of motion from the tree after I tie it to the roof of the minivan. I'd give it a 50/50 chance of falling off our car as we take one of the switchbacks on the road back to Asheville. I have this vision of my daughter throwing up out the window at the exact moment the tree flies loose. But a little car-sickness won't ruin this tradition. Neither will the dull saw, or the 60-degree temps, or my lack of lumberjack skills.

When we retell this story in years to come, we'll gloss over the tiny failures and focus on the beauty of the farm. We'll remember the wagon ride and the llamas. The rows of perfect trees. Getting muddy

and laughing with each other. Maybe that's the hidden beauty of these family traditions that my wife and I try so hard to create. They're messy, they're cumbersome, and they're never exactly how we picture them. And yet, somehow, they're perfect. **Os**

Graham Averill is a contributor to Our State.

He writes about adventure and travel for Outside, Bike, and Southern Living. He lives in Asheville with his wife and two children, all of whom humor him when he puts on his lumberjack pants.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES HARRIS

That tree atop the SUV, carefully baled and tied by the folks at Sandy Hollar Farms, signals to everyone in your neighborhood that Christmastime has begun at your home.

SANDY HOLLAR FARMS

LEICESTER • For many families, a trip to Sandy Hollar to pick out a tree is a Christmas tradition that includes a visit to the Hawkins family’s menagerie of llamas and longhorn cattle and, of course, the farm’s eight big, white Great Pyrenees that keep an eye on the various herds and flocks. For Dale and June Hawkins (below right, with Marty Wines, one of about 15 seasonal staff who helps on the farm during the holidays), Christmastime begins in early November when they start making wreaths — ranging from eight inches to four feet in diameter. And the season doesn’t end until the Hawkins family is gathered around their own Fraser fir on Christmas Day. 63 Sandy Hollar Lane, Leicester, NC 28748, (828) 683-3645, sandyhollarfarms.com.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES HARRIS



*BROWN'S CHOOSE and CUT
CHRISTMAS TREES*

BOONE • After the final fir is sold this December, and the last kids take their annual sled ride with the farm's Belgian horse, Buck, an almost 40-year tradition will come to an end for Gary and Lynda Brown, who are retiring from Christmas tree farming. At its peak, the almost 100-year-old Brown family farm boasted nearly five acres of Christmas trees. And with views of Elk Knob State Park to the north and bottomland to the east where Howard's Creek makes a horseshoe turn, the farm was an anticipated pilgrimage for many families.

2648 NC Highway 194 North, Boone, NC 28607,
(828) 264-2800.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SARA BRENNAN



CIRCLE C TREE FARMS

BOONE • Taking guests on a hayrides through stands of Fraser firs was the furthest thing from Dennis Cook's mind back in the 1970s and '80s, when cattle grazed the hillsides on his 30-acre farm. Then about 20 years ago, the landowner and his friend, tree grower James Henson, agreed that because of the farm's location — in the Blue Ridge Mountains, a mile off NC Highway 421 — his place would be ideally suited to growing and selling trees. A partnership grew, and today the farm sells trees, garlands, and wreaths — and, yes, it has hayrides for visitors.

372 Will Cook Road, Boone, NC 28607, (828) 265-7504, circlectreefarms.com.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOMMY WHITE



This time of year, Dennis Cook, sporting a green Circle C Farms shirt, and his son Daniel are busy cutting, baling, and loading trees, as well as tending to the farm's animals, which guests can pet when they're not looking for trees.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOMMY WHITE



FROSTY'S CHOOSE and CUT

WEST JEFFERSON • If your family ventured to West Jefferson in the 1960s and '70s, you probably have fond memories of Sexton's Christmas Tree Farm, which was started by Byron Sexton in 1960. Three generations later, a trio of Sexton brothers — Andrew, Matthew, and Thomas — have brought the farm into the 21st century, complete with a retail shop, live Nativity, and, new this year, a build-a-wreath station and mini build-a-wreath station for kids.

2152 Beaver Creek School Road, West Jefferson, NC 28694,
(800) 238-TREE (8733), gofrostys.com.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SARA BRENNAN



The Sexton brothers who own and run the farm (from left, Thomas, Andrew, Matthew) started Frosty's in 2002 and continue the family tradition of making memories for guests with branded stumps and delicate ornaments. They get assistance in the memories department from one of Santa's helpers, Charles Blevins (opposite page), who entertains kids on hayrides.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA BRENNAN

*LIL' GRANDFATHER
CHRISTMAS TREE FARM*

LAUREL SPRINGS • Della and Buddy Deal hail from two of Laurel Springs' oldest tree-growing families — Della's family has run Tucker Tree Farm for more than 50 years, and Buddy's family has been selling trees at Smokey Holler Tree Farm since 1972. The Deals started Lil' Grandfather in 2004 when they bought Roger and Wanda Mathis's choose-and-cut business. (The Mathises still own the land.) In addition to firs and pines, the farm also boasts a very busy barn where they offer horse rides, host vendors, and conduct do-it-yourself centerpiece-making workshops. A hay bale movie theater screens holiday classics throughout the day. 15371 NC Highway 18 South, Laurel Springs, NC 28644, (336) 372-9613, lilgrand.com.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SARA BRENNAN



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA BRENNAN



MISTLETOE MEADOWS

LAUREL SPRINGS • For the past 28 years, Joe Freeman (left) has been selling live trees — from classic Fraser fir to Leyland cypress — at his farm in Laurel Springs, and farm-grown cut trees, greenery, and boxwood wreaths from five retail lots across the Piedmont. In 2007, a Mistletoe Meadows tree debuted in the White House Blue Room. The farm has provided trees to the White House ever since.

270 Mistletoe Meadows Parkway,
Laurel Springs, NC 28644,
(336) 982-9754,
mistletoemeadows.com.



A handsaw — and a little help from his sons, Smith and Holt — is all Hugh Nachey of Ferguson needs to fell their fir. Opposite page: A hayride, learning how a sapling grows into a tree, and a cup of hot chocolate — Eliza Harrell likes a candy cane with hers — complete a day at Mistletoe Meadows.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA BRENNAN