



GROWING



JOY

GATHER YOUR LOVED ONES FOR A DOSE OF FRESH AIR AND
HOLIDAY SPIRIT AT ONE OF SONOMA'S FAMILY-RUN, YOU-CUT TREE FARMS.

BY MEGAN MCCREA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIM CARROLL

FARMER KEITH GARLOCK SMILES, remembering a story he once heard from another Christmas tree grower. “When new employees come to work, they tell them, ‘You’ve heard Disneyland is the happiest place on earth? Well, this is the second happiest place on earth.’ I like that, because it really is. It’s festive — it gets everybody in the holiday spirit.”

Keith would know: He and his siblings, Debbie and Bill, grew up on Garlock Christmas Tree Farm, a Sebastopol you-cut operation founded in 1966. Each December, he watched as bundled-up families would tumble out of their cars, then wander among the lacy-fingered cedars and fragrant pines in search of the perfect tree to take home. It’s a ritual that’s been repeated from year to year to year, with little changing besides the hairstyles and the cars. It’s also a joyful reminder that, even as the world around us shifts and shivers, some things remain the same.

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As the customers preserve their holiday traditions, so too does the Garlock family. In 1985, Keith’s siblings and their spouses bought property just over the hill from the original family farm and founded their own farms, Frosty Mountain, pictured on these pages, and Reindeer Ridge. And in 2001, when his parents retired, Keith took the reins. “To tell you the truth,” he says, “the entire Christmas tree business is a tradition that’s been passed down in the family. It’s a way of life.”

Carol and Kriss Mungle of Petaluma chose that way of life in 1985. Like the Garlock kids, Carol grew up on a local Christmas tree farm, Larsen’s. She and Kriss were living in the East Bay when her dad asked if she might want to move back and get into the family business. “My husband, who wore a three-piece suit to work every day, was like, ‘Sounds good!’”

The Mungles bought an old chicken ranch and transformed it into Little Hills Christmas Tree Farm. The Petaluma property, a stone’s throw from Helen Putnam Regional Park, is a slice of the wild, drawing deer, foxes, and blue jays during the quiet off-season. The wildlife cohabits with the Mungles’ own animals: 5-year-old Newfoundland Chloe; rescue pigs Marigold and Petunia; alpacas; miniature donkeys; and a pair of garrulous turkeys. “You can talk to them, then they start talking,” says Carol. “It’s the funniest thing!” She and Kriss love seeing the



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happiness Little Hills brings to customers. “In a time where people are busy and families are going in different directions, it’s so special to have a day with an outing where you go do something together,” she says. “People thank us for being open.”

After running the farm for three decades, Carol has noticed something else, too. “When we first started, our motto was, ‘We’re growing tradition.’ Thinking we were growing *other* people’s traditions, right? And one year it occurred to me, not only did we grow their tradition, we grew our own tradition, because these families—I’ve been watching them come since they were little kids. And now they’re grown with their little kids. And that’s pretty special.”

KNOW YOUR TREES



BLUE SPRUCE

Recognizable by its bluish-colored needles, this Rocky Mountain native is particularly beloved as a Christmas tree due to its pyramidal shape and symmetrical appearance.



COAST REDWOOD

Unlike the famously tall adults, young coast redwoods look more like other conifers, with bright-green needles a whorl around the trunk. **Tip:** Those set on getting this type of tree should make sure to harvest from a sustainable farm.



DOUGLAS FIR

A classic Christmas tree for Northern California: bright green with long, well-spaced branches. The Doug fir holds its needles well, and it's incredibly fragrant.



INCENSE CEDAR

True to its name, the incense cedar smells great — its wood is used to make cedar chests. With fanlike branches and clusters of small pine cones, it's a great fit for shoppers who love a woodland aesthetic.



MONTEREY PINE

This type of tree has very lush foliage and bright-green needles. Its top is often tall and lanky — perfectly suited to holding a tree topper.



A TREE HUNT THAT HELPS SAVE THE FOREST

At two local nature preserves, the goal of finding the perfect tree goes hand in hand with one of even greater importance: reducing the threat of wildfire. Since 2017, the Santa Rosa-based conservation organization LandPaths has welcomed the public to the Riddell Preserve for an event they call “the Great Charlie Brown Christmas Tree Hunt.” The preserve, a gorgeous 400-acre oasis of oak woodlands, redwood trees, and open grasslands overlooking Dry Creek Valley, is just beginning to heal from effects of the August 2020 Walbridge fire. In 2019, LandPaths added a Charlie Brown tree hunt at its new 400-acre Ocean Song preserve in western Sonoma County. The group plans to offer tree hunts at both locations again this winter. The aim is to thin out unwanted species of trees and improve the health of the surrounding forest. For 2020 dates and registration, visit landpaths.org.

SONOMA'S BEST YOU-CUT TREE FARMS

Celesta Farms

Opened by Christmas-loving couple Steve and Carol Schwartz, this relative newcomer, founded in 2006, welcomes dogs with Milk Bones and humans with homemade chocolate chip cookies. Bonus: They've got views for days. 3447 Celesta Court, Sebastopol 707-829-9352 / celestafarms.com

Frosty Mountain Tree Farm

The “old red barn” — a 50-year-old apple packing shed — marks the spot at this farm, owned by Bill and Lynn Garlock and featured in the photos on these pages. Guests can caffeinate at the coffee truck and gape at panoramic views on the hayride. Bonus: Friendly goats! 3600 Mariola Road, Sebastopol 707-829-2351 / frostymountaintreefarm.com

Garlock Christmas Tree Farm

Keith and Becky Garlock are old pros and consummate hosts, offering thoughtful advice on tree selection, and free coffee to boot. Bonus: They grow a wide variety of trees, including the fragrant grand fir. 2275 Bloomfield Road, Sebastopol 707-823-4307 / garlocktreefarm.com

Grandma Buddy's Christmas Trees

Think Grandma Buddy's looks like something out of a Pottery Barn catalog? It is! The property, graced with a beautiful barn and a seasonal stream, is so picturesque, it's been a cover model. Bonus: hot chocolate made with Grandma's recipe. 8575 Graton Road, Sebastopol 707-823-4547 / grandmastrees.com

Graton Fire Department Christmas Tree Farm

Proceeds from this farm — staffed by Graton firefighters and held right outside the firehouse — benefit the all-volunteer department. Time your visit right and you might meet Santa in a fire helmet. Bonus: This site was formerly the landmark Del Davis Tree Farm, memorialized in a 1995 song from the band Primus. Where else but Sonoma will you find a tree farm with its own funk-metal anthem? 3750 Gravenstein Hwy., Sebastopol 707-322-2091 / gratonfire.com/christmas-tree-farm.html

Larsen's Christmas Tree Farm

This old-school spot is especially welcoming for first-timers: they offer saws, carts, and even “lumberjacks” to assist as you select and cut your tree. Bonus: The scenic grounds make a great background for last-minute Christmas pictures. 391 Marshall Ave., Petaluma 707-762-6317 / petalumachristmas.com

Little Hills Christmas Tree Farm

Little Hills isn't just a tree farm—it's also home to a menagerie that includes Carol and Kriss Mungle's Newfoundland dog, alpacas, mini-donkeys, and turkeys. Bonus: the gorgeous sales barn, made from reclaimed wood from the property's old chicken barns. 961 Chapman Lane, Petaluma 707-763-4678 / littlehillschristmastree.com

Pronzini Ranch

Pronzini is well-known for its pumpkin patch. Less well-known: after Halloween, Pronzini Ranch, located on Adobe Road (not to be confused with the Pronzini tree lots) opens for you-cut tree harvesting. Bonus: The 128-acre ranch has an impressive petting zoo with ponies, pygmy goats, and long-horned Watusi cows. 3795 Adobe Road, Petaluma 707-778-3871 / pronzinifarms.com

Reindeer Ridge Christmas Tree Farm

Next door to Frosty Mountain sits Reindeer Ridge, owned by the Garlocks' daughter Debbie and her husband Paul. The farm is especially kid-friendly and has stunning views of adjacent vineyards. Bonus: Delightful photo ops inside the reindeer sign. 3500 Mariola Road, Sebastopol 707-829-1569 / reindeerridge.com

Santa's Trees

Looking to hike on the way to finding your tree? This wild, hilly property in the western part of the county — where trees of all shapes and sizes are intermingled — is your place. Bonus: Dogs are allowed (off-leash!), and there's plenty of room to romp. 11389 Barnett Valley Road, Sebastopol 707-303-6084 / santastrees.biz