

Spectacular Christmas Trees Have Roots In Pennsylvania

KENNETT SQUARE (Chest-er Co.) — They might not be as famous as the Christmas trees in Rockefeller Center or at the White House, but for Berks County's DeLong Christmas Tree Farm, the Christmas trees they supply each year to Longwood Gardens are every bit as special.

The farm's Douglas and Fraser fir trees are an important part of Longwood's breathtaking holiday display of exquisite decorations, brilliant poinsettias, fragrant flowers, and living wreaths. The lavish floral and tree displays, plus sparkling lights, fountains and festive music, draws a steady stream of visitors to the world-famous Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, near Philadelphia.

Longwood Gardens, one of the world's premier horticultural showplaces, hosts thousands of visitors to its Christmas spectacular each year. Longwood offers 1,050 acres of gardens, woodlands, and meadows; 20 outdoor gardens; and 20 indoor gardens within four acres of heated greenhouses.

Since 1989, DeLong Christmas Tree Farm has been the exclusive supplier of Christmas trees to Longwood Gardens. Steve Custer runs the family-owned and operated farm in partnership with his wife, Jean, and his in-laws, Tom and Ann DeLong. The farm has been in the DeLong family since 1941.

This year, they provided 47 trees to Longwood Gardens for their annual Christmas display, including two massive trees that top 20 feet. The trees are lavishly decorated and displayed throughout the Conservatory and greenhouses.

The focal point is Longwood's signature tree, a spectacular 20-foot-tall revolving Douglas fir adorned with garlands of silver larch branches and fern fronds studded with red berries and lotus pods and hundreds of red glass balls and metal icicles. It sits in the Conservatory amid a river of brilliant red poinsettias.

Tree selection for the holiday display starts in September when a master gardener from Longwood makes the one-hour trip to the Berks County farm to choose the trees. Armed with a pick list which details the size and variety of trees required, he usually spends a half-day tramping through the farm's neatly ordered rows to find the trees that will meet Longwood's exacting specifications.

The trees are cut in mid-November, and transported to Longwood in four trucks.

While professional designers decorate most of the 47 trees, local elementary schools also participate in the festivities by decorating trees that are displayed in the greenhouses.

"One of the harder parts of the jobs is se-

lecting the trees that will be decorated by the elementary school children," said Steve Custer. "We need to find 24 perfectly matched, 4-foot Fraser fir trees. Longwood demands that those trees be as uniform as possible."

Custer says the weather this year was especially favorable for growing outstanding quality trees.

"The drought and heat of the last few years were tough on the trees. But this year, the weather was ideal. Even though the abundant rainfall meant we had to do more mowing than usual, it provided the trees with excellent moisture as we headed into harvest. An early cold snap provided the hard freeze that the trees needed to stay fresh after they were cut."

In addition to commercial customers, including the Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md., DeLong Christmas Tree Farm also has a thriving retail business with trees, wreaths, and stands available in a huge new

(Turn to Page A23)



Snow-covered trees at DeLong Christmas Tree farm in Knauers.



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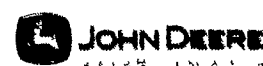
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