

Plastic may be fantastic but only a real Christmas tree will cut it

HAVE really fond memories of my childhood trips to get our Christmas tree.

My dad would take my sister, my brother and I out in our estate car, armed with an axe and some twine, and we'd travel up a snow-covered country road to find somewhere where an evergreen would be growing. The outing usually culminated — after a big argument over which tree to choose — with my dad strapping a less-than-perfect-but-still-beautiful tree to the top of the car, and packing us all home where mum would serve hot chocolate.

If this sounds unlikely to you a bit too Hallmark-card perfect — it might not surprise you to find out that I grew up in Canada.

Not just Canada, but northern British Columbia, where trees outnumber people by about 82 million to one, give or take, and there's always a white Christmas. It has meant that, for me, the fake Christmas trees you buy in the supermarket just won't cut it.

I need a real tree. The smell, the beauty, the nostalgia — it's all there. Sorry, but at Christmas time, nothing else will do.

And I'm not the only one who thinks this way. The annual handpicking — or "choosing and cutting" — of a Christmas tree for the festive period is experiencing something of boom in the UK, according to the British Christmas Tree Growers Association. So much so, producers and suppliers in Wales have formed a Welsh Christmas Trees Cooperative to meet the needs of fans of real trees.

Roger Hunt, of Cymru Christmas Trees at Llanarthne in the Towy Valley, is one of four Welsh businesses involved. He says people are starting to appreciate the value of traditional things at Christmas — "and one of those iconic Christmas images is a real Christmas tree".

"We have noticed that people are keener to buy local nowadays and you can't get more local than a Welsh Christmas Tree," he adds.

Indeed. So off we went to Salem Christmas Tree Farm, near Llandeilo to sample some of that festive fun.

Carole and Jack Bouffler have been running the place for the past seven



REAL DEAL More and more people are starting to choose a real tree for the festive season ahead of a plastic alternative.

Christmas is coming — and it's time for the annual tree panic. If an artificial tree just won't cut it, then you might want to join the growing numbers "choosing and cutting" their own Christmas tree. **REBECCA CONNOP PRICE** visited a farm to get the whole festive experience.

years, but it has existed as a Christmas tree farm for about 25 years.

It is now something of a destination venue with woodland walks, a duck pond, and a cheerful Christmas shop all on site. At weekends, there is even a Santa to greet arriving children. But it is the trees that are the stars of the show.

"It's quite a labour intensive job," says Jack. "Especially when the trees are young."

The trees also need regular "shearing" — the term tree growers use to describe manicuring the conifers. The couple grow a wide variety of evergreens, including Norwegian spruce, blue spruce, Douglas firs and Nordmann firs. All require slightly different care regimes, and all grow at different rates. But when Christmas time comes around, it makes all the hard work worthwhile. "It's lovely. When the children see Santa, that makes

it quite meaningful. I see their faces light up and they're full of expression," says Carole.

Families can choose one of the freshly-cut trees or venture into the woods with Jack and he will help them fell their perfect specimen.

Carole adds: "Lots of people like to make a day of it."

The Rees family from Clydach in the Swansea Valley are one such family.

Mum Jacqueline, 40, visiting the farm with her husband Chris and two of their three children, says: "We've been coming here for the past nine years. It's a nice family day out. It's the whole thing, it's the setting, it's Father Christmas, it's something different that we have never experienced elsewhere. It's the start of the season for us."

There are also venues near Swansea which are also popular with families. The Gower Heritage Centre in Parkmill stocks a variety of fresh Christmas trees, alongside their other festive attractions, including grotto, farm animals and heritage mill. Some of the trees are grown in Parkmill while others are harvested from a site in Dunvant.

The centre's Roy Church says the youngest trees require a lot of attention. "Rabbits are very partial to Christmas trees, unfortunately. It has been a problem."

But once the trees are big enough, they can be left alone to grow into the trees that everyone wants in their living room, albeit with regular manicuring.

Rob Morgan of Gower Fresh Christmas Trees in Three Crosses says: "Choose and cut is definitely growing in popularity. We've also found that the public are fascinated to see, first-hand, the work that goes into producing the perfect tree."

As for me, I wanted to re-create my childhood experience, so this year my tree comes directly from the woods at Salem Christmas Tree Farm.

There was no snow on the ground, but the experience definitely got me into the festive mood. Jack and I got onto a quad bike, he handed me a saw, and off we went. We reached a clearing where several smallish trees were growing, and I selected a pretty Nordmann fir. It took quite a lot of sawing to make the cut, but I managed it without Jack having to use his back-up chainsaw. Voila, my very own Christmas tree!

It may seem like a lot of effort to go through — especially as you can go to any store and buy an artificial tree that you can set up in the comfort of your own home — but I have no doubt that the effort is worth it.

The proof? I couldn't wipe the smile off my face all way home.

It's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas...

Water and some cool air are key for trees

HANDY hints to help keep your Christmas tree look good through the season:

● **Always give your tree a drink in a bucket of water as soon as you get home, even if it has been sawn off and been sitting on a pavement for days. Much like cut flowers, the tree will absorb water into its leaves through the trunk.**

● **Don't place your Christmas tree by a radiator — it will respond by shedding its needles.**

● **Keep it cool. All these evergreen firs have adapted to cope with cold winter weather and will react to heat — even what we consider to be low background central heating — with panic, dropping their**

leaves in order to conserve moisture. A cool, draughty hallway is ideal.

● **Invest in a cast-iron tree holder with a reservoir and keep it topped up daily with water. This is an excellent way to support even a large tree and will help it stop shedding its needles.**

● **Take your tree to the council shredder if you are not going to plant it out, so it can be recycled.**

● **If you buy a tree with roots, pot it into a large container and fill with sharp sand or compost. Sand is perfectly good for the few weeks that the tree will be indoors. Place the pot onto a tray, then water it well and keep the sand moist.**



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