

Fir things first

For the customers at Wilderness Wood it's time to wander through the plantation to pick – and cut – their own tree

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Family tree

Two generations of woodland folk – Joanna Yarrow (with Tosca) seated next to mum Anne, with partner Jonathan and dad Chris

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It's like walking into the fairy story of *The Lonely Little Christmas Tree*,

except this hillside overlooking the South Downs twinkles with the reflected light from not one, but hundreds of firs and spruces, all decorated with tinsel and baubles. As you get closer you can see that some have been strung with laminated photographs of pets and children, some with poems.

From the beginning of November, it's become something of a modern tradition for people to flock to the half-hectare Christmas tree plantation at Wilderness Wood in Hadlow Down in East Sussex where, after walking among the trees, they tie a tag to mark the one they want. Just before Christmas they'll return, armed with a saw, to cut their own tree and, after a mince pie and a cup of something hot in the cosy timber-frame barn cum visitor centre, café and gift shop, they'll drive it home.

'The decorating just began spontaneously,' says Joanna Yarrow who, with her partner Jonathan, has recently taken over the running of the 25 hectares of Wilderness Wood from her parents Chris and Anne. Some unscrupulous buyers, it seems, had been swapping tags; the decorating was families' personal way of protecting their trees from snitchers.

Of the 5,000 trees in the plantation about 700 will be selected for sale each Christmas. Another 2,100 trees are brought in from local suppliers to meet demand. This is very much Chris Yarrow's territory. A chartered forester, until recently he ran his own forestry and recreational consultancy business.

Although he and Anne recently moved a mile and a half down the road so that Joanna can live in their old house in the wood, he remains on hand to advise on forestry

matters. The Christmas trees need careful pruning twice yearly, removing top growth to create a nice bushy silhouette, weeding and spraying against mites and aphids. Every year, of the 1,000 two-year-old transplants put in each March up to a third will die, either because they have failed to establish a foothold in the poor, shallow acid soil or from summer drought.

Woodlands are notoriously bad for money-making, says Chris, but when he and Anne, a keen conservationist, bought the land in 1980 they were determined to make it pay its way. Both had grown up in the Seventies back-to-the-land days and as they reached middle-age they dreamed of putting their theories into practice. After a long search they bought Wilderness Wood: 'The wood was very open then. The sweet chestnuts were coppiced on a 15-year cycle and when we bought, it had been recently cut. There was no official public access and no paths to speak of,' says Chris.

The Yarrows wanted to convert some parts of the wood to 'continuous cover'; that is, trees of mixed species and ages. They opened up views, cleared the overgrown rides, made new paths for walkers and cleared an area for the Christmas trees. By offering added extras such as a small café, walks and events, as well as a playground, they hoped to draw in paying visitors. Most importantly, they opened the wood to locals to walk in free.

'It's been almost 30 years of trial and error,' says Chris. And of hard graft. In their first year they came down at weekends, clearing the paths by day and sleeping in a caravan with their daughters Joanna and Kate, then six and three. The more they explored, the more ▷



WHICH TREE SHOULD YOU BUY?

Norway spruce The traditional tree, pretty shape with sharp, light needles that drop quickly indoors.

Nordmann fir Non-drop with pungent, piney smell. Open layered branches.

Blue spruce Dusky blue needles with stiff branches that won't bend under the weight of the decorations. Forest scent.

Douglas fir Soft, shiny green needles and sweetly scented. Holds its needles well.

A wood isn't just for Christmas

Maintaining the viability and attractiveness of Wilderness Wood is a year-round commitment and labour of love, though it's at this time of year that it comes into its own