My gardening story

Christmas tree grower **Simon Maughan** on how he started growing trees as a festive crop, and how his other life as an RHS book publisher changed his approach to running his farm

PIC CREDIT

I remember clearly my dad saying to me, 'while you were away, I planted some Christmas trees.' It was 1998, and I had just returned from a year in Australia. A trucker and scrap dealer by trade, my dad's actions were a little out of context, but it was in his enterprising nature to plant a seed and watch it grow.

I think I can trace my interest in growing plants to childhood, but maybe it's just in my blood. I recently discovered that I am descended from Northumberland farming stock but, when you think about it, aren't we all 'from the land'? Isn't this why nature is so integral to our wellbeing? I studied biological science at Edinburgh University. A four-year degree, starting in 0000, led me to botany and the eminent Dr Philip Smith. Named by his perplexed parents after a brand of light bulb, his enthusiasm and wit switched me on to plants in earnest.

Up until this time, I thought that owning and operating a flower press was just something I did with my partner Kate for amusement, but no. It's a key bit of kit for a student botanist. And while I was studying plants, she was in nearby Stirling completing an MPHIL in Book Publishing. I clung to her coat-tails and followed her to London. A marriage of skills eventually found me publishing books for the RHS.

Growing project

Frenchay Christmas Tree Farm was always supposed to be a side project, yet my attitude to it was slowly being informed by the people I met and worked with through the book job. For example, renowned plant ecologist Ken Thompson made me aware of how important gardens are to wildlife. Fashion designer Wayne Hemingway with his interest in the built environment caught my attention when he enthused about the value of green spaces around new housing, and naturalist Chris Baines brought to my attention the importance of flood plains. So, I planted a double native hedgerow around my 18-acre site, let grass grow under the trees instead of laying down weedkiller, and this year dug a huge pond for wildlife.

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Kate and I now care for 40,000 Christmas trees, so this business has grown well beyond a side project. I view the 'farm' not only as a plantation, but also as a habitat and a source for wellbeing – not just for me, but for my neighbours and my customers, who come to the farm for a bit of an outing. When I see how visitors respond to being among the trees, often with their entire family, I know that there is something a bit more elemental at work than just taking a tree home for Christmas. All our green spaces have a value, and they are to be cherished. ○

How to keep your Christmas tree fresh through the festivities:

1 **Don't buy early:** Christmas trees are living things, but slowly deteriorate after they are cut. You wouldn't buy Valentine's Day flowers on 25 January.

2 **Buy locally grown trees:** these are likely to have been cut recently so will be fresh, with fewer road miles, too.

3 **Keep it cool and watered:** Christmas trees hate underfloor heating. Turn down radiators near the tree. Spruce trees in particular must be watered at the base.

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