

Picture-perfect setting

Story by Ching Lee • Photos by Lori Eanes

Families find festive photo ops at Christmas tree farm

With its picturesque landscape thick with Douglas firs, grand firs, scotch pines and Sierra redwoods, it's no wonder Black Road Christmas Tree Farms in Santa Clara County has become a popular spot for shutterbugs this time of year.

People have been flocking to the cluster of three farms west of Los Gatos to choose and cut their own Christmas trees for decades. But in more recent years, the site has also attracted many scores of photographers who want to use the scenic views as a backdrop. So farmer Robert Criswell began dedicating one weekend in early November as an

open house for photo ops.

"It just sort of evolved," Criswell said of the yearly event. "It developed very casually at first, and then for some reason or another, word got out, probably among photographers."

He used to open by appointment for photographers—until "it got out of control," he said. Now he opens Farm #1, which is next to Lakeside Elementary School, and then goes back to work getting ready for the farm's actual opening day—typically the day after Thanksgiving.

Criswell's original motivation for the

photography open house was to free up the farm's parking lot for his tree customers during the Christmas season. But he said he also sees the open house as "good PR" for the farm and "as a kind of service" for the community.

Photographers are fans

San Jose photographer Abigail Alanis has been using the farm the last few years to shoot holiday family portraits. Even though there are other Christmas tree farms in the region, she said, Black Road is not too far a drive for her clients. They want their pictures taken on a farm but don't necessarily want to venture too remotely for photo sessions.



Abigail Alanis takes holiday portraits at a Santa Clara County Christmas tree farm for clients including the Donder family, left, the Sarakakis family, inset top and center, and a member of the Smith family, above.



“The location is amazing,” Alanis said. “You don’t need anything. The trees are so pretty.”

A huge draw for photographers is that Criswell doesn’t charge a fee to use his farm. Alanis noted other farms do—and some have a list of requirements.

Many photographers shoot on Christmas tree farms because they want natural settings, said Jeri Seifert, a Solano County Christmas tree farmer who serves as president of the California Christmas Tree Association. Unlike Criswell, Seifert charges \$50 an hour per booking slot to access her farm in Dixon during open hours. She said she considers it a form of marketing. If a photographer brings people to the farm and “they have a positive experience seeing the beauty of the trees, they’re going to come back,” she said.

Most of the time, people are taking photos for Christmas cards, she said. Her farm has also served as a backdrop for wedding, engagement and graduation photos—and much more.

“I’ve had videos done on my farm for musicians,” Seifert said. “I’ve had big car groups come in and do pictures with cars and my trees. I’ve had high school kids push a motorcycle into the middle of the trees and take a picture.

There’s been a zillion different things they’ve tried and done over the years.”

Scenic, private and family-friendly

Ashley Smith of Morgan Hill said she usually picks a spot in town to shoot family photos for her Christmas cards, “but they all start to look the same after a while.” So she decided to try Black Road last year “for a change of scenery.” The open house allowed her “to shoot on a beautiful, private location” without having to invest in a permit, she said.

“I love outdoor photos and natural light, and this location checked both of those boxes,” Smith said. “Their trees are beautiful and gave the photos a Christmas feeling even though I took them before Thanksgiving.”

Smith said not only was she happy with how her photos turned out, but the open house allowed her kids to run around the farm without the usual crowds that swarm the fields during tree-selling season. Her plan, she said, was for her family to come back during the farm’s regular hours to choose and cut their own tree, which she described as “one of our favorite family traditions.”

Criswell, however, nixed plans to open in 2020 due to concerns about COVID-19. The decision was “painful,”

he said, and “still hurts.” He later opened just his upper farm on a limited, self-serve basis.

This year, with more than 50,000 trees in the ground, Criswell said he needs to open because “I’ve got so many trees and I need to get them out.” This is despite not having planted any new trees in the last five years, mostly because he’s run out of space—and at 77, he’d be in his 90s before any new plantings would be ready to sell, he said.

A long tradition

A biologist by training, Criswell has been farming Christmas trees since 1966, after getting the idea from a neighbor who was growing them. He started at 21 when he was in graduate school. Though he had experience farming, he had never grown Christmas trees before getting in the business.

What he calls his “lower farm”—where he allows photography—was his grandparents’ prune orchard in the 1920s. His father raised livestock on the upper farm. Criswell bought the third property—where he now lives—in 1975 while he was working as a high school science teacher. He developed the farm using “any little scrap of time” between classes and at night, he said.

“When we went into it, I never expected it to last this

long,” Criswell said of his tree business. “My dad’s analysis was it’ll last five years and it’ll all be over. But it’s grown.”

Today, people from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and as far away as the Central Valley, the Central Coast and Los Angeles make the trek to Black Road to cut Christmas trees.

“I’m just amazed at the distances and the sacrifice in traffic, time, gasoline and everything that they’re willing to make to come here,” Criswell said.

He’s gotten to know families that have been coming to his farm for generations. Many of them treat the outing as a family activity or wildlife experience; people have told him about their sightings of bobcats and wild turkeys. Some customers are so eager to get their trees that they’ve called him as early as 4 a.m., wanting to know when he’d be open, he said.

Though growing the trees is what he likes most about the business, Criswell said he also enjoys seeing people have fun.

“That’s part of the spirit,” he said. “It’s like a friend of mine told me once, I’m not so much selling Christmas trees. I’m selling the experience.”

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Robert Criswell, owner of Black Road Christmas Tree Farms, hosts a photo open house each year.



The Sarakakis family, above, heads into the trees to have portraits taken by Abigail Alanis, left. Far left, the photographer sets up a holiday-themed backdrop for her clients.

It's an art and a science

Having a science background comes in handy for farmer Robert Criswell, who says he often applies his knowledge of botany, chemistry and geology to the art of growing Christmas trees.

“I see Christmas trees differently than the normal person,” he said.

To keep deer from eating his young trees, he made his own deer repellent by blending raw egg and capsicum oil from chili peppers with fish emulsion fertilizer. He then applied the concoction to the tips of his trees.

“It was a horrific mix,” he said. It was so potent that one year he attracted the attention of a buzzard, which kept following above him in the field. “He could smell the stuff I was spraying.”

More common is his battle with insect pests such as needle midges, tiny flies that can infest and damage Douglas firs. Midge populations became so severe some years ago that Criswell worked with entomologists in the U.S. and Canada to find solutions to control them—and then held grower meetings to spread the knowledge.

“This year, I haven’t seen any evidence of (midges) at all,” he said.