## Business

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## Tree farming good for environment

## Shale Hills Farm set for holidays

By LAURA DEAL

For The Herald

WANTAGE - Tree farm owner Michael Garrett has developed the job of Christmas tree farming into a green art - not only in the color of his product, but in the environmental benefits his crop brings to the table.

"We get a lot of people saying they don't like the idea of going into a forest and getting a tree for the purpose of decoration," said Garrett, owner of Shale Hills Farm in Wantage. "What's important to realize is that trees are farm produced and are no different really than corn or pump-

Moreover, Garrett rallies the benefits of Christmas tree farming to the environment.

"Christmas trees act like tiny little air conditioning units," Garrett said.

During tree growth, the climate surrounding the trees is actually significantly cooler due to a process called transpiration.

"I've consistently noticed a 5to 10-degree difference in sumtemperature mertime air between our farm and downtown Sussex Borough, just three miles away," Garrett said.

Furthermore, the plastic counterpart of Garrett's business the artificial tree — is a detriment to the environment, he

"They use petroleum in their manufacture and undoubtedly pollute the environment both in their production and as waste in our landfills for hundreds of years to come," said Garrett.

Another note to ponder trees release life-sustaining oxygen. According to the National Christmas Tree Association, an acre of Christmas trees release the daily oxygen requirement for 18 people.

"A forest does this too but not as much as a Christmas tree farm," said Garrett. "An active growing young tree produces more oxygen than a 65-year-old tree in a forest which is just holding its own."

Garrett grew up at Shale Hills Farm, along with his three brothers, when the farm was mainly used to grow hay and corn. Due to erosion issues on the property, the Garretts planted Christmas trees and left them. Eight years later, with a crop of spindly trees, they ran an ad — "cut your own Charlie Brown trees."

"I had no idea I would have the traffic jam I did over this kind of Christmas tree," said Garrett. "I figured then if people were willing to come here for Charlie Brown trees, then let's go into this business and have quality."

Garrett works the farm as a side job, but has a year-round

## Shale Hills Farm

Where: 98 Pond School Road, Wantage Phone: (973) 875-4231

www.ShaleHillsFarm.com or www.NJChristmasTrees.com

What's offered: Cut-yourown Christmas trees Owner: Michael Garrett







Michael Garrett is shown among his evergreens at Shale Hills Farm in Wantage, while his fiancee and business partner, Carol Owens, relaxes by the pond. Garrett says Christmas tree farming is a year-round endeavor. He adds that evergreen farming actually slows global warming and doesn't pollute the environment like the manufacture of artificial trees does.

schedule, planting new trees, trimming, mowing and the like. The transplants that go into the ground are only 8 to 10 inches tall, having grown to that point in a nursery in western Pennsylvania.

"It takes four years in seed beds," Garrett said. "The seeds are taken from pine cones. Then it's another 8 to 12 years before they are sellable."

Garrett has noticed in the last few years, a demand for larger trees.

"With many people in homes with cathedral ceilings, it's common for them to look for a 25-foot tree," said Garrett.

But the bulk of Garrett's sales are for 6- to 8-foot trees. Last year saw a whopping 2,000 trees cut with about 8,000 visitors to the farm between the weekend of Thanksgiving and the weekend before Christmas. All trees are priced at \$75.

"It's just easier that way, with one price for everything," Garrett said.

Garrett's business relies primarily on just eight days per year. "It's very risky," said Garrett.

"People will come out in the snow, but if it's raining they won't come."

Garrett tries to plant a variety of pines, spruce and firs.

"A few years ago Martha Stewart mentioned the concolor fir smells like oranges and they were all sold the first weekend of

the season," Garrett said. Garrett has a very short window of time for his plantings each year. They have to be in the ground before the spring rains. Usually he will shoot for planting the end of March through May 1. With five fields and 52 acres, along with 10 acres owned by his brother, Congressman Scott Garrett, adjoining property, he has his work cut out for him.

Because of the cut-your-own system, Garrett is forced to interplant in every field, which yields

year of its life," said Garrett.

"Trees don't grow in a Christmas

fields of vast varieties to choose Next is spraying and then the

shearing process, which lands at the hottest time of the year. "A tree has to be sheared every

tree shape."

The density of a tree is acquired through the shearing process, year after year.

"When you make a cut, instead of one bud that was cut off, five or six grow back in its place," Garrett said.

Garrett displays a real artistry for the shearing process.

"I do it all by hand," said Garrett. "Most farms this size go for mechanical shearing. I think that's a cookie cutter approach. By hand I can make some skinny for those in small apartments and some larger. It's much slower and your arm wears out, but it gives much more variety."

Garrett ran the Christmas tree display at the Sussex County Farm and Horse Show for 30

"Several years in a row, we won best of show," said Garrett.

Then comes the mowing process for a month after shearing, followed by the fall planting.

"This past spring 4,000 trees were planted and about 1,500 will go in this fall," said Garrett.

All of the planting is done by

Garrett and his fiancée, Carol

Owens. Garrett also puts a lot of work into the family outing of coming

to cut the trees down. "We really try to make this a nice family outing with a real Santa Claus and petting zoo," said Garrett.

Last year Garrett had a 1,000pound pig on display, along with goats, sheep, chickens, turkey and rabbits. In years past he's had ostrich, llamas and miniature donkeys.

"We try to mix it up," Garrett said.

An 1800s vintage barn on the property houses the petting zoo. Decorated with lights and greens adds to the holiday air. Food and refreshments are also available such as hot chocolate, sandwiches, hot dogs and chili.

"Many of the same families come every year," said Garrett. "It's like Giants Stadium with everybody tailgating for the day. It's the Christmas tradition for many to come out to the Garrett farm. It can be 10 degrees and they'll still do it."