

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oconto grower will supply Christmas tree for Capitol

By Joan Koehne, Oconto County Times Herald
And Cheryl Nicholson, Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association

An Oconto County tree will be gracing the Wisconsin State Capitol this Christmas and competing for a spot at the White House next year.

A balsam fir tree grown at Whispering Pines Tree Farm in Oconto was chosen Grand Champion Christmas Tree, topping 19 other entries at the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association Convention last weekend.

“I was thrilled. I didn’t really expect to win,” said owner Dave Vander Velden. “The competition is so great. You’re up against the best and you don’t expect to win.”

This is the second year Dave chose a tree for the contest and the first year his entry won. Trees were judged by association members attending the convention, and Dave said it was an honor to be selected by his peers. The association is comprised of about 200 members.

He said he chose the eight-foot tall tree because of its look—dense with even growth. Because it needed very little touch-up with the shears, it had a nice, feathery look. Although it appeared to be a strong contender to Dave, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” he said.

Dave acknowledged he had an advantage this year because of his proximity to Green Bay, where the convention took place. Less travel time helped keep the tree looking fresh. The winning tree was a 13-year-old balsam tree that was planted in Oconto as a 5-year-old.

Tree growers could compete with a tree in each of five classes: Balsam fir, Fraser fir, other fir, pine, and spruce. Many farmers are growing non-native species, and the contest included some of them. The spruce class included Serbian spruce, Meyer spruce and Black Hills spruce; Concolor, Corkbark, and Canaan were represented in the fir class.

Dave and his wife Mary have owned Whispering Pines Tree Farm, located near Oconto, since 1984. Dave had previous experience as a tree grower in Door County, where he said he learned what not to do. The soil was better suited for tree growing in Oconto County, and the farm opened to the public in 1995. The couple runs the farm with the help of Dave’s father, Jerry Vander Velden.

“He helps out a lot. He’s here every day. He’s really a blessing to have around,” Dave said of his dad.

The family also hires part-time help during the busy holiday season, as many as 40 employees who are offered flexible hours to fit their schedules. Six workers are also hired during the shearing season, which extends from the Fourth of July through Labor Day. During this stretch, workers use long knives to cut away the boughs to give the trees their Christmas-tree look. Dave estimated the 150-acre farm is home to over 90,000 trees.

Dave is a full-time tree grower, noting, “There’s no rest.”

In the springtime comes planting, fertilizing and spraying for weeds; the summer is shearing time; the fall begins the tree harvest and wreath making. By the end of November, the farm welcomes guests for wagon rides, train rides aboard the Whispering Pines Express, visits to the gift shop and of course, cut-your-own Christmas tree purchases. Whispering Pines also sells pre-cut Christmas trees at its Oconto location and on Webster Avenue in Allouez, and sells nursery stock in the spring and summer. This year’s new attraction is a candy store.

“It’s a really fun, family place,” Dave said.

Dave and Mary will provide a 10 foot tree for the Governor’s conference room at the State Capitol this December and will present it during the Rotunda Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony.

They will select another tree to compete in the National Tree Contest at the convention next August in Sandusky, Ohio. Each state association can send two growers to compete. The winner of the national competition provides the 18 foot tree that is displayed in the Blue Room of the White House. ###