

FARMER CHRISTMAS

For a few magical and fleeting weeks, this timber man welcomes you to find your tree—and your holiday spirit—in the deep woods of Gaylord.

STORY BY EMILY TYRA // PHOTOS BY ANDY WAKEMAN





We pull up to Martell's Northwoods Tree Farm midafternoon. Solstice is days away, so dusk is already nipping at our heels. Keith Martell greets us with his bird dog, Daisy, by his side. We have a batch of fresh baklava as a holiday offering for Keith and his family, but leave the tray in the Jeep's backseat for now. Keith is heading into the wild yonder of his Otsego County forestland to prep a family's U-cut tree to take home.

Keith is a forester. He helps landowners manage and make the most of their forests. He operates 520 acres of his own timberland. He's a conservationist and activist, serving on the board at HeadWaters Land Conservancy. And leading up to the holiday season, Keith and his wife, Cathy, welcome Up North neighbors to their pre-cut and U-cut tree farm in Gaylord's snow belt.

We hop in with Keith and bump down a two-track that dips and curves through the woods like a holiday roller coaster ride. "I started planting trees here with my dad when I was six years old," he says. Martell's Northwoods Tree Farm, established in 1954, was a hobby for his dad, an engineer for Ford. His dad purchased this land in Gaylord intending to plant trees on it. "As with all engineers, he liked to tinker," says Keith. "So he built a custom tree planter to fit behind a Ford tractor. I helped my dad plant, and I loved it. It's why I decided early in life to become a forester."

Keith has an M.S. in Forestry from Michigan State University, served as a state forester for many years and is now partner and president of Martell Forestry, where he guides Michigan forestland owners to make informed decisions, protecting both the owner's interests and the forestland itself. He crafts forest management plans that include planting trees, maintaining trails, protecting and improving wildlife habitat and forest stand improvement. He and his team of certified foresters administer harvests from start to finish.

He cuts the engine and we jump out. "It takes about 13 years to grow a Christmas tree in this God-forsaken soil," he laughs. He walks in tall boots over the snow-coated blue lake loamy sand—sandy dry soil that happens to grow good Christmas trees. "Every tree that gets cut, we plant two more." He points out the seedlings popping through the snow so we're careful not to step on them.

Keith grows and sells "perfect" trees wholesale for tree lots and markets downstate. But on the U-cut side of his farm, he is less keen on bending nature to human will.

"We try not to do a lot of spraying. This is a natural tree farm—the trees here are not perfectly manicured like the ones that are wholesaled." He loves the ceremony of people coming to choose and cut their own holiday tree. "People like to see trees that are Charlie Brown stage, all the way to really, really nice ones."

It's a delight to walk together among the farm's plantings. As we crunch over the snow, Keith points out about 16 different species: Black Hills spruce, Balsam fir, Norway spruce ... incredibly, in what seems like a sea of evergreen, we can suddenly see the individual character of each and every tree. We admire a darling Korean fir, "It's gorgeous, ornamental, soft," says Keith. "Plenty of needles, and look what happens when you lift it." We see a flash of classic white striping underneath. He shows off a typical Black Hills spruce. "A lot of people like that tree, because you can load it with ornaments and it doesn't sag," he says. "It has stiff branches—not too prickly—and nice silvery color." Most folks these days seek out a Fraser fir, a soft fir that retains its needles very well. When Keith planted hundreds of trees back in the day with his dad, they

planted all Scotch pine. "When you grew up in the '50s, that was the Christmas tree."

The low-slung sun on the vast landscape gives the whole scene an ethereal glow, like a movie set. Only it's real, and way more beautiful. "There's no other place like this on Earth," Keith says matter-of-factly.

And that truth is what makes him passionate about serving on the board at HeadWaters, a group of directors, donors and volunteers who share in a mission of preserving the remaining undisturbed natural resources in Northeast Michigan.

"What kills forest is development," says Keith. He says he thrills in describing for the first time the concept of a conservation easement to landowners. "The central thing to land preservation is getting people to care. And you do that by getting them to look at and appreciate the beauty. At this point in my life, I am passionate about improving and protecting the forests, land and water in this area."

We suddenly come upon his customers—a young couple and their tiny daughter. The pair grew up here.

"Want it baled?" Keith calls out. That's a yes. Keith starts the work of lugging their tree back to the baler. After baling it neatly, Keith hauls the tree to Martell's pre-cut stand and gift shop, where Cathy is making wreaths. Keith's daughter-in-law emerges to maneuver the tree on a drill to ready the tree for its stand. She takes extra care, ensuring the tree will stand straight. Keith secures the tree to the top of the family's SUV, and waves as they head down the drive. "And that," Keith pauses, with a bemused twinkle in his eye, "is how you make \$37."

The white holiday lights at the pre-cut stand start to glow and Keith and Cathy's son, Boots Martell, returns from his day's work. He, too, is a forester for Martell Forestry, and like his dad, there is nothing else he ever wanted to do. Since it's almost dark, Daisy goes on-leash. She is a rescue dog, and her early life was not the best. "Cathy knew she was a keeper," Keith says, "And Daisy's so grateful. She aims to please."

Keith opens the front door to let Daisy back in the house, and we behold his own Christmas tree, a soaring Serbian spruce. It's un-pruned, the way Cathy prefers it, and, as of now, still undecorated. "Maybe after Christmas tree season," he laughs. We gift the tray of baklava, and head into the crisp, cool hush of twilight in the Northwoods. Keith is right, it's like no other place on Earth. **📍**

Emily Tyra is editor of *Traverse*. emily@traversemagazine.com. Andy Wakeman is a commercial and editorial photographer in Traverse City. andywakemanphoto.com

Martell's Northwoods Tree Farm is a family-run, full-service farm with U-cut and pre-cut trees available for \$35, in all sizes (\$2 for baling). 205 Arrowhead Trail, Gaylord, 989.731.2062; Monday-Thursday 3-5 p.m. // Friday-Sunday 8:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.



IF THE TREES ALL LOOK THE SAME, PEOPLE CUT THE FIRST ONE THEY SEE. AND WHAT'S THE FUN IN THAT?

—KEITH MARTELL





The Gift of Land Preservation

HeadWaters Land Conservancy has been preserving the forest, farmlands and waters of Northeast Michigan—some of the largest natural lands left in the Lower Peninsula—since its inception in 1994. Tree farmer and forester Keith Martell is a proud member of the board at HeadWaters, putting to good use his 40 years of experience in natural resources management.

Keith shares why conservation is important to him: “I’ve seen a lot of places in my life but nothing compares to Northern Michigan. Having a relationship with the land and everything that relies on it is deeply satisfying for me. I care about the land and the people who enjoy our natural resources. I am also very interested in helping people deal with the critical issue of succession of ownership of their land. The relationships people have with each other can affect the land in ways that can’t often be predicted. Planning for the future of your land with your family and others will help us conserve the places we love, for the people we love.”

To date, HeadWaters Land Conservancy has worked behind the scenes to protect:

- 6 nature preserves
- 86 conservation easements
- 10,877 acres of land
- 32 miles of shoreline

Visit headwatersconservancy.org or call 989.731.0573 to learn about the Conservancy’s work in 11 counties of Northeast Michigan.