Cut your own tree this Christmas

It was growing dark at the Taylor Christmas Tree Farm near Washington, La., and Mike and Becky Taylor were clearing the area and picking up their tools, preparing to go home, when a voice rose from the thick of the tall pine trees, "For godsakes, Alice, would you make up your mind!"

Perhaps the only drawback of selecting a Christmas tree from a farm is the selection itself. Local tree farmers offer a few acres of live trees to choose from, and the trees are always greener on the other side of the field. The more you wander around, the more you see a tree here or there, or over there, that looks better than the last one you saw.

In 1961, LSU began experimenting with Christmas trees. The variety and narrowed the field to four or five species easily acclimated to the tropical climate. Those grown in this area are primarily Virginia Pine, similar to the popular Scotch Pine in appearance.

The trees you may have purchased at sales in parking lots of shopping centers are shipped from "Up North." There is absolutely nothing wrong with those trees, simply that they are grown elsewhere and some comparisons can be drawn.

Louisiana offers a prime growing season for all trees, especially pine. Our climate offers a 10 month growing season each year, compared to a four month growing season in colder climates. That allows growers to raise a 6-foot tree in just three to five years, compared to six to 12 years growth period elsewhere.

It's very difficult and strenuous work to raise trees for sale during holiday season. The trees aren't tall enough to sell until at least their third year, which means farmers don't realize a profit for some time.

The life of a Christmas tree begins in a nursery, where superior seeds are planted and grown to seedlings, which are then replanted. During the life span of the tree, it faces many hazards. Trees can suffer from too little or too much sun and rain, or face destruction by insects or disease.

The Couvillon Office of Forestry has played a major role in the development of Christmas tree farms in Acadiana. In the last four years they have sold to farmers over 80,000 young Virginia Pines, and assisted in the planting and raising of the trees. Michael Buchart, unit forester, estimates 40 people in Acadiana's 11 parish area are growing trees for sale. Yet, Louisiana-grown trees fulfill less than 1 percent of the Christmas tree market here.

Older Acadiana may have memories of going on a family outing to the woods to "choose and cut" a Christmas tree, but younger families may now enjoy the old ritual by "shopping" for a tree on a farm. Trees on farms are planted plantation-style in rows, so it takes a little bit of pretending.

One outstanding aspect of locally-grown trees is the price. They sell for $3 a foot on the average (i.e. a six-foot tree sells for $18).

Two farms recommended by Buchart are Taylor's near Washington and Vincent's Christmas Tree Farm near Kaplan. A few things must be kept in mind when selecting "homegrown" trees. The trees shipped here from above the Mason Dixon have usually been sprayed green because the true color of a pine has a slight yellowish tint. This is to satisfy our natural tendency to desire a bright green Christmas tree. It does not harm the tree, in fact, it is believed to help preserve the moisture in the needles and keep the tree fresher longer. Some local growers also spray their trees, but don't be dismayed if you see a tree that is slightly yellow. You can tell if a tree has been sprayed by noticing green spots on the bark of the tree.

During growing season, the inside needles of the tree die out and fall, and the needles on the outside of the tree grow longer. The process of cutting, wrapping and shipping the trees to the South causes most of the dying inside needles to fall off, but trees you see on the farms still have some brown needles clinging to the inside. This does not mean the tree is dying, it is much fresher than those cut and shipped South and will live much longer. Once the tree is selected and cut, the farmer may offer to blow the needles off with compressed air, or you can shake the tree up and down, knocking the brown needles to the ground.

Vincent's Christmas Tree Farm offers seven acres of trees from which to select. The oldest trees are four years old, with an average height of 5 feet. The Vincents have sold out of trees over the height of 5 1/2 feet, but those shorter trees are very lovely and full with good shapes.

The Vincents supply saws and will cut the tree for you if you wish, and tie it with twine to put on the roof of your car or in the trunk.

Each of the trees is already measured and priced, so you will know what the tree will cost before cutting it. If you wish you may pick the tree and tag it, and come back later to cut it down and take it home to be decorated. If you already have this tree, it is something to remember for next year.

The Vincents expect to sell 1,000 trees by December 25 realizing a profit of roughly $12,000 an acre.

Vincent's Christmas Tree Farm is open seven days a week until Dec. 25. To get to Vincent's from Lafayette, take Hwy. 167 South into Maurice and turn right on Hwy. 92. Take Hwy. 92 down to Hwy. 700 and turn left. Vincent's is up six miles on the left.

The trees at Taylor's farm are roughly six years old on 11 acres of land. They have many trees left, with an average height of 7 feet, ranging from 4 feet to 20 feet. The taller trees are not as well shaped as those under eight feet, but are still very attractive. The Taylors sold 1,500 trees last year and expect to sell 3,000 this year.

"Shopping" at Taylor's is a great deal of fun because the acreage and the height of the trees really do make the farm seem more of a forest. You will need to bring your own saw and twine, a hand saw will do the trick in a matter of minutes. At Taylor's the trees are measured and priced after they are cut. You are welcome to tag a tree, but they do not accept money beforehand and cannot guarantee that the tree will still be standing when you come back for it.

Taylor's Christmas Tree Farm is open 7 a.m. until dark through Dec. 12, on weekends only. Because of the recent rains, they may be open during the week and may stay open longer into the season. It's worth the drive out to check.

To get to Taylor's, take Hwy. 167 North through Opelousas, following the highway signs. Turn right onto Hwy. 10 four miles north of Opelousas, then take the right fork onto Smithland. Both Vincent's and Taylor's have directional signs on the highway.

If you've been putting off getting a tree this year, or if you're put off by the high prices, treat yourself and your family to a nice experience and drive out to a Louisiana tree farm for a fresh tree. Remember to yell, "Timber!"