



## **Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association, Inc.**

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Oconto Christmas Tree Farmer Wins National Contest, While Endeavor Family Wins State Contest**

Summertime is a great time in Wisconsin to attend a county fair. You will see contests of every kind with entries competing for the top ribbon. Did you know that Christmas tree growers also compete in a contest? Each summer, the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association (WCTPA) sponsors a Christmas tree contest which is held during their convention. Christmas tree growers from across the state can enter the contest in as many as five classes. Their entries are Christmas trees grown and nurtured by them for many years.

Along with the state contest, there is also a National Christmas tree contest and this year they were held at the same location. Wisconsin growers joined up with the Mid-America Christmas Tree Association, the Indiana Christmas Tree Growers Association and the Illinois Christmas Tree Association to have a joint event at the Richardson Adventure Farm in Spring Grove, Illinois. The event included the two contests, a large variety of speakers, and a tent full of vendors selling supplies and products for Christmas tree growing and wreath making.

So just like when you enter County fair or state fair, you don't always win the prize that you want. Sometimes it takes a number of tries before you win grand champion. After entering the National contest four times, Dave Vander Velden has finally received the coveted prize. On Saturday morning when the winners of the national contest were announced, Wisconsin members clapped loudly. A Balsam fir Christmas Tree grown by Dave & Mary Vander Velden, of Whispering Pines Tree Farm in Oconto, WI, and a Douglas-fir Christmas tree grown by Jay and Glenn Bustard, of Bustard's Christmas Trees in Lansdale, PA were named Co-Grand Champions of the National Christmas Tree Association's (NCTA) 2015 National Christmas Tree Contest. As growers of Grand Champion trees, each farm has earned the right to present the official White House Christmas Tree the next two seasons. Since 1966, NCTA members have presented the official Christmas Tree for display in the White House Blue Room. The tree in 1966 also came from Wisconsin. NCTA hosts the National Tree contest biennially and will not hold a national contest in 2016.

The National Contest also anointed Co-Reserve Champions of the contest. Traditionally, the Reserve Champion farmers have provided a Christmas Tree for the residence of the Vice

President. The Co-Reserve Champions are Charles Sturgill of Sturgill Tree Farms in West Jefferson, NC and Rex Korson of Korson's Tree Farms in Sidney, MI. Sturgill placed second in the True fir category with a Fraser fir and Korson placed second in the spruce category with a Blue Spruce.

Trees entered in the NCTA contest must fit into one of five species categories: True Fir, Douglas-fir, Spruce, Pine or Other. A panel of judges, made up of long-time growers and past contest winners, selected the first-, second- and third-place winners in each category, then attendees of the regional conference and a panel of consumer judges voted for their favorite among the species first and second place trees. Those vote totals determined the Grand Champion and Reserve Champion trees.

“A fresh, farm-grown Christmas Tree is a great tradition in our country, and we Christmas Tree farmers love this particular 49 year tradition of the national contest,” said Blake Rafeld, NCTA president and a Christmas Tree grower from Ashland, OH. “You have to be really good at your craft just to be eligible to enter the national contest let alone win it.”

“I was ecstatic when I heard my name called,” said Vander Velden. “The national tree contest is the Super Bowl for Christmas Trees... what an honor. And the competition is very intense. My dad, Jerry and I spent a lot of time making sure the tree looked its best. But I don't deserve all the credit. The great crew we have working on my farm have helped us reach this goal.”

Whispering Pines Tree Farm was founded in 1984. Dave and his father, Jerry, started the Oconto farm in 1988 with a garden tractor and 16 acres of land. The farm has grown to 200 acres and grows a variety of firs and pines. A log warming lodge built from trees that Vander Velden planted as a child is the center of activity when the farm opens in November for Choose and Cut customers. They are an agri-tourism farm offering horse drawn wagon rides, the Whispering Pines Express (a tractor that looks like a train engine), a Holiday shop, and opportunity to visit with Santa and some alpacas. Visiting the farm and picking out a real Christmas tree has become a tradition for many area families.

Jay Bustard echoed the sentiment that a lot of work goes into getting a tree ready to compete in the National Tree Contest. “We are fortunate to be voted one of the best trees in the contest by our peers,” said Bustard. “Our employees were a big part of growing this tree. We thank them.”

White House staff members typically travel to the Grand Champion's farm in the fall to select the tree that will serve as the centerpiece of the Blue Room holiday decorations. The Blue Room tree will need be 18 ½ feet tall, much bigger than the 6- to 8-foot trees entered in the contest. To enter NCTA's national contest, growers must first win their state/regional competitions in the previous 24 months.

In the Wisconsin contest, WCTPA members are able to enter one tree in any or all of the contest's five classes- balsam fir, Fraser fir, any spruce, any pine, and other. Members then vote for the best tree in each class and for an overall Grand Champion tree.

This year's Grand Champion award went to Jim & Diane Chapman, Silent Night Evergreens, of Endeavor, Wisconsin. Their Balsam fir was chosen as the best tree. They will be representing their farm and all the members of WCTPA when they present a tree to Governor Walker this coming December. They are also eligible to enter the National Christmas Tree Association's next contest.

Chapmans have been growing trees in and around Marquette County since 1977, harvesting their first trees in 1984. With over 400 acres in production, most trees are sold wholesale. One of their sons, David is involved full time in the family business. This is not their only Grand Champion ribbon, but they don't take it for granted. Jim commented, "You keep growing the best trees you can and you keep entering them in the contests. You just never know when you might win."

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#### ABOUT WCTPA

The Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association is an association of Christmas tree growers and related industry businesses. The mission of the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association is to promote real Christmas Trees, wreaths and greenery through marketing and education of our members and customers by quality production of real farm fresh and fragrant products while protecting the environment.

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#### ABOUT NCTA

The National Christmas Tree Association is the national trade association representing the farm-grown Christmas Tree industry. NCTA represents around 600 active member farms, 29 state and regional associations, and 4,000 affiliated businesses that grow and sell Christmas Trees or provide related supplies and services. To learn more, visit [www.realchristmastrees.org](http://www.realchristmastrees.org) or call 636/449-5070.

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