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One family kicks off the holiday season

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by getting back to nature.

STREE

BY CHANTAL LAMERS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY SETH SMOOT

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Two years ago, Seth and Kendra Smoot moved from New York to Northern California seeking a total lifestyle 180. The couple had originally relocated from Utah to New York for Seth's job as a photographer, but found themselves longing to return to the West. "Seth would come out here to work almost every month," says Kendra. "He got a taste of it and couldn't shake it."

Since moving to Marin County with their kids—Stella, 9, Imogen, 4, and Truman, 1—the Smoots have become devoted day-trippers. Even picking out a Christmas tree is a chance for an adventure. "Moving here from a city, we were excited for our feet to crunch through piles of fresh fallen needles," says Kendra, who works as a freelance stylist. For her family's inaugural trip to Larsen's Christmas Tree Farm in Petaluma, Kendra made the most of the day, packing a picnic and playing Frank Sinatra's holiday classics as they drove through the redwoods and a fog-banked reservoir: "We took the most scenic route," she says. "It added a special step."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Many strollers aren't farm-friendly, so Kendra recommends bringing a wagon if you have young kids. Stella poses with a hand-saw (most cut-your-own-tree farms provide them at no charge). The Smoots park their car for one last photo op before driving their tree home.



PROP STYLING: KENDRA SMOOT

+ TIPS FOR A TOP TREE

Here's how to keep your conifer happy and healthy through the season indoors.

PICK A WINNER

Whether you're at a farm or on a lot, look for trees that are lush without any brown branch tips. A trick to determine if the tree is fresh: Pick a few needles and bend each in half. Fir tree needles should snap cleanly; the fir is too dry if the needles arch without breaking. For pines, it's the opposite—the needles should bend without snapping.

KEEP IT IN SHAPE

Many farms will shake your tree to remove loose needles and insects and then wrap it in twine for the ride home. When placing the tree on the top of your car, face the cut end toward the front so branches aren't bent the wrong way during the drive.

RECUT AT HOME

Within a few hours of a tree being chopped down, the trunk seals itself off, preventing water from passing through. Use a small handsaw to remove an additional two inches off the base, then place the tree in water.

CHECK WATER DAILY

Your tree is thirstier than you might think: In *Sunset* tests, a Douglas fir with a 4½-inch trunk took up a gallon of water in its first 24 hours at home.

+ A FEAST IN THE FOREST

Check ahead to find out whether the farm you're visiting allows picnics on the grounds; if it doesn't, find a park to stop at along the way. For her family's picnic on the tree farm, Kendra filled a thermos with homemade butternut squash soup and kid-friendly toppings (recipe opposite). Another idea: hot cider plus a fruit-and-cheese spread, including Bosc pears, red grapes, salumi, and a favorite Western blue (or cheddar for the kids). Instead of disposable tableware, Kendra loads her everyday dishes into a crate, with napkins cushioning breakable items. "It's part of my goal to be zero-waste, but it also makes it feel more like a special occasion," she says.



PICNIC ITEMS Folding metal table, vintage. Bistro chairs, thewoodenduck.com. Stool, kalonstudies.com. Bowls, shop-generalstore.com. Striped cloth bento bag, ambatalia.green. Lidded ceramic bowls, sarahkersten.com. Thermos and glass water jar, vintage; elsiegreen.com. Flatware, dwr.com. Napkins, libecohomestores.com. **CLOTHING** On Kendra: Dome Panama hat, clyde.world. Kids, left to right: Stella's coat and skirt and Imogen's hat and scarf, overtheocean.com. Imogen's shirt and dress, mabokids.com. Truman's sweater and hat, shop.misha-and-puff.com.



+ SPICED APPLE BUTTERNUT SQUASH SOUP

SERVES 4 TO 6 / 2 HOURS

Roasting a whole squash takes longer than one that's cut up, but Smoot finds it easier (and safer) to peel and cut the squash after it's cooked.

- 1 large butternut squash (about 3¾ lbs.)
- 2 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 cup chopped red onion
- 1 Granny Smith or other firm-tart apple, peeled, seeded, and coarsely chopped
- ¼ tsp. each ground nutmeg, cinnamon, cardamom, and ginger
- ⅛ tsp. ground cloves
- 2 to 3 cups reduced-sodium chicken or vegetable broth
- Kosher salt and pepper
- ¼ cup crème fraîche
- Optional toppings: Candied pecans, rosemary crackers, thinly sliced apples or pears, pomegranate seeds, flat-leaf parsley leaves

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Roast whole squash on a rimmed baking pan until tender enough for a long skewer to go all the way through neck of squash, about 1¼ hours. Let cool.
 2. While squash cools, heat oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add red onion and apple and cook, covered, until onion is translucent and apple is tender, about 5 minutes. Add spices and cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 1 minute.
 3. Halve cooled squash lengthwise and scrape out seeds and discard, then scoop out flesh and set aside.
 4. Remove onion-apple mixture from heat and stir in cooked squash and 2 cups broth. Whirl in batches in a blender until very smooth. Return to pot and heat over medium heat to warm through and blend flavors, 5 to 10 minutes. Add more broth if needed to thin to desired consistency; season with salt and pepper to taste.
 5. Ladle soup into bowls. Spoon crème fraîche onto each and serve with toppings.
- Kendra Smoot

PER SERVING 184 Cal., 30% (55 Cal.) from fat; 5 g protein; 6.2 g fat (2.9 g sat.); 31 g carbo (8.1 g fiber); 65 mg sodium; 19 mg chol. LS

+ WRAP STARS

Kendra uses tree trimmings, sprigs, moss-covered twigs, and seedpods, to elevate her gift-giving game.

YOU'LL NEED

- » Scissors and pruning snips
- » Three branches, 12 to 14 inches long, for each large wreath. For smaller wreaths use two 12- to 14-inch pieces. (Alternatives include cedar, bay leaf, and rosemary.)
- » Twine
- » Winterberries, pinecones, acorns, and moss (optional)



STEPS

1. Lay the branches end to end, overlapping the ends by 1 to 2 inches, and tie ends together with a piece of twine.
2. Form a circle, allowing the needles to feather out. Tie with twine.
3. Build a small bouquet of berries, acorns, and moss. Tie with twine and fasten to wreath.
4. Use twine to tether the wreath to the gift.

RIGHT A tree looks even prettier in a basket: Place its trunk inside a bucket, well-secured with large rocks and filled with water, then place the bucket inside a burlap-lined basket.



+ TREE FARMS AROUND THE WEST

These farms range from simple in-and-out operations to hot-chocolate-and-Santa wonderlands. Some national parks also offer U-cut trees but require permits.

NORTHWEST

Warm up by the bonfire with free hot cocoa at **Farmer Brown's Christmas Tree Farm**. *Arlington, WA; brownxtree.com.*

At **Trinity Tree Farm**, you can get both your tree and, on select dates, some quality time with Santa. *Issaquah, WA; trinitytreefarm.com.*

ROCKY MOUNTAINS

Snow or shine, hop on a hayride, roast marshmallows, and decorate

wreaths at **Covered Bridge Ranch**. *Montrose, CO; coveredbridge ranch.com.*

Spy porcupine and ermine amid the lodgepole pines in the 2.2 million acres of the **Wyoming Medicine Bow-Rout National Forests**. *fs.fed.us.*

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Larsen's Christmas Tree Farm offers fresh wreaths and a picture-perfect setting for your holiday card. *Petaluma; petalumachristmas.com.*

Find varieties such as Sierra redwood, sugar pine, and Arizona cypress at **Crest Ranch Christmas Tree Farm**. *Santa Cruz; crestranch.com.*

Decorate stockings and take a train ride through **Santa's Tree Farm and Village**. *Half Moon Bay; santastreefarm.com.*

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Highland Valley Christmas Tree Farm offers wine tastings from its vineyard. *Ramona; pine.pineandwine.com.*

Visit **Sand Haven Pines** for a huge selection of Monterey pine. *Perris; sandhavenpines.com.*

SOUTHWEST

Santa Fe National Forest tree permits are available (late Nov–Dec 24) at ranger stations. *NM; fs.usda.gov/santafe.*

At the **Mogollon Rim** at Coconino National Forest, choose from a Douglas fir, white fir, or ponderosa pine. *AZ; fs.usda.gov/coconino.*

+ DIGITAL BONUS Find other charming places to source your holiday tree at sunset.com/treefarms.