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In search of the perfect tree

(Filed: 13/12/2004)

Amanda Chater meets the man responsible for sourcing New York's biggest Christmas tree

David Murbach has spent a large part of the past 20 years in pursuit of the perfect tree. He is responsible for finding New York's arboreal glory: the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree, the city's majestic festive centrepiece that is visited by hundreds of thousands of people, natives and tourists alike, every year during the five weeks it is lit.



David Murbach and his 70ft tall tree

His search begins in January with a week-long helicopter tour of the north-eastern United States. This way, he can cover around half a state per day, much more than 10 years ago when he was limited to a car.

Murbach uses a laptop and a GPS system in his helicopter to mark where he sees potential trees, "even though I can't get really close, but I can get to within a quarter of a mile or so". He says he sometimes presses the GPS button a few too many times if a day is advancing and he has not found anything, but he usually finds 15 to 20 trees worth returning to by car to be checked for flaws.

These can include "just strange things, like a large limb near to the ground" or branches that slope downwards instead of horizontally or slightly upwards. Finding the perfect tree seems only slightly less difficult than finding the perfect mate.

Over the years, Murbach has grouped the trees into two easy categories: Feather Style, which have the right height and width but aren't dense enough; and The Perfect One. "When I find that tree, it's like a marriage. I'm not married, but I presume when I find someone I won't ask, 'Should I? Shouldn't I?' I'll just know it's The One. You don't even have to ask yourself if it's good enough."

Rockefeller Christmas trees are preferably over 70ft tall, 40-45ft wide and dense enough that you can't see the sky through them. They are usually 70- to 90-year-old Norway spruce – the only type that has the proportions that resemble the Christmas trees children draw. "Height is the easiest thing to find; width the second; and then density," Murbach says. "It's all about how the branches hold

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themselves."

Every featured tree has been found on private land. Norway spruces in forests cannot grow to the right proportions and so trees are found in the gardens of ordinary people who have unknowingly tended a celebrity tree for years.

Each week, Murbach gets letters from people offering their tree, but only once – last year – has a letter produced a perfect tree. "I glanced at a photo and thought maybe this was the one," he says.

The trees are often lifted over houses and some owners have even offered to have their houses moved to allow for a tree's exit.



The Rockefeller Centre tree in situ

There's sadness for the owners over the loss of their tree, but there's also relief. Murbach finds that often they're scared of it falling on to their house and once they see it lit, "they're the happiest people in the world".

The actual felling takes less than two minutes, then the tree is loaded on to a special trailer using a 280-tonne crane and up to 20 people. Finally, it arrives in Manhattan at the dead of night to minimise disruption.

Murbach, who describes his work as "horticultural theatre", spends the first part of the year looking for his perfect specimen, when the deciduous trees are leafless, which makes his task easier. "It's not a full-year job, but it doesn't leave my mind very often and there's always something going on with it," he says.

"I think it's something that's through my whole system – it's certainly how I get introduced at cocktail parties."

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