

Christmas tree season already under way

By Tina Susman, Los Angeles Times

ARLINGTON, Va. – It was 90-plus degrees outside, but there was a distinctly wintry feel in the second-floor lobby of a hotel overlooking the Potomac River.

Perhaps it was the rows of Christmas trees, standing tall and straight as tin soldiers. Or maybe the wreaths displayed on stands, like perfect leafy doughnuts, or the velvet bows and sparkly ribbons.

The only thing missing was Santa Claus.

The height of summer might seem a strange time for this event, but there is method in the apparent madness of the annual gathering of the National Christmas Tree Association.

It gives tree growers a chance to swap ideas on how to confront some of their biggest challenges, such as the popularity of fake trees – “permanent trees,” as folks here call them. It offers vendors the chance to find buyers for everything from color-enhanced trees – yes, some are painted – to tree stands.

It also determines which of the firs, spruces and cypresses on display in the lobby will be crowned “grand champion,” an honor that guarantees its grower a visit to the White House to present First Lady Michelle Obama with the official Blue Room tree. The runner-up is known as the “grand reserve,” and its grower gives a tree to the vice president.

“It’s a very big deal,” Vicki Smith said. “It’s sort of like the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show for Christmas trees.”

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