

# Adorning Blackberry Farm

James Prine and his decorating crew create holiday magic.



At Blackberry Farm, darkened roads and walkways glisten from a recent rain, the drops still splattering from lush evergreens and stark bare limbs. As the dampness cools the wintry twilight, snow beckons at this picturesque resort in rural Walland. The utter stillness of the early evening is broken only by occasional footsteps of people hustling out of the cold and into toasty rooms with roaring fireplaces.

Suddenly, the silent night crackles with energy as vans and a 24-foot-long truck roll into this automobile-free setting, where guests exchange car keys for chauffeured golf carts. As the engines die, James Prine and his crew spring from their convoy. Bags, boxes, garlands, and trees—seemingly as endless as the bounty from Santa's magical pack—soon emerge from the vehicles.



With his slim physique and cropped blond hair, James looks nothing like St. Nick. But, like that jolly old elf, the interior designer creates enchanting Christmas magic.

**Making a List, Checking it Twice**  
“Let me get my list,” James says as he pauses near heaped decorations. He refers not to Santa’s roster, but to dozens of details noted during the days that preceded tonight’s setup.

The pause for list-checking marks the final time tonight the perpetually moving James will halt. For the remainder of the evening, those attempting to match his frenetic walk practically lope to keep up.

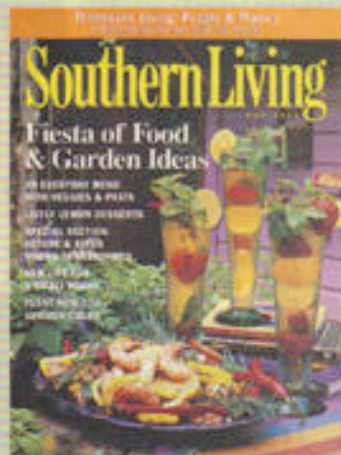
In contrast, Blackberry Farm’s sumptuous setting virtually requires relaxation, offering ambling walks down wooded trails, sing-alongs in front of crackling bonfires, and todies after a day of horseback riding or

**top, left:** Pheasant feathers, woven vines, and a bird’s nest highlight this outdoors-themed tree. **above:** James Prine gives decorating instructions.

fly-fishing. Serenity reigns at this 2,500-acre property, where guests revel in natural splendor, pampering service, gourmet dining, and exquisitely detailed lodging. Once James and his crew arrive on the scene, the site quickly transforms into even

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above: Loretta Lang (left), Ashley Mims, and Tony Murchison (seated) get pointers from James. above, right and below, right: Setup begins in the early evening and continues through the night, taking hours to decorate each tree.

more of a winter wonderland.

Decking these halls takes preparation and finesse. "We prepare anything we can ahead of time to be less intrusive to people who stay here," James says. Occasionally, however, curious Blackberry guests happen upon the decorating chaos. "I encourage whoever is working to answer any questions," James says. "You have to be courteous and aware of the public. They're the guests."

#### "Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot..."

For Blackberry's holiday theme, the energetic designer harkens back to the past. "In the old days, the owners of a country estate would invite family and friends to come stay at the house for Christmas," James explains. The large farms raised their own food and were fully prepared for extended stays by visitors. "It was like a country house party," he says.

"That's the feeling that I'm trying to emulate with the Christmas decorations," the designer continues. "If Blackberry were in fact

a self-sustaining country house, what would they do for Christmas? Buying something synthetic doesn't fit the profile."

Toward that end, James gathers natural materials year-round. "You know how farmers will let corn sit in the field to dry at the end of the season, then use the cobs to feed the pigs?" he asks. "I purchased the pig feed, and we turned it into garlands. Same thing with the peanut garlands," he continues. "I had peanuts grown and harvested with their leaves and roots still intact." Getting the peanuts right

**"I purchased the pig feed, and we turned it into garlands."**

*James Prine*

took five years, he adds. "Nobody was willing to do it." He laughs, adopts a deep drawl, and imitates the response to his unusual agricultural requests. "You want it for Christmas? What kind of Christmas are y'all havin'?"

A perfect one, if James has his way, although he prefers describing himself as "detail-oriented." Members of his staff, however, draw no such distinction. "He's very meticulous," says Ashley



Mims with admiration. "He likes perfection in everything." As an example, she cites James's four-hour process of lighting a tree.

"I don't like to see the wires," James explains. "The branches have to be wrapped with the lights and go from the trunk of the tree out the branch and then back to the trunk." He grins and adds, "You don't jump from branch to branch if you're lighting a tree for me. That's one of my little things that drive people crazy." Then he says, only mock seriously, "There is no tree-lighting-and-hanging-garland school." ▶

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Dried corn is used as holiday garland. "The decorations need to be items that historically could have been used for Christmas," says James.

No one disputes James's personal contributions to achieve perfection. Each evening, when the crew departs for a well-deserved night's rest, he typically keeps toiling until 5 a.m. or so, then he goes to bed and sleeps until noon.

### O Tannenbaum

Although James has used other types of trees since he began decorating at Blackberry Farm eight years ago, the Noble fir remains his tree of choice. "The Fraser fir is a perfect tree—but that's not what I want," he says. "Who wants a perfect tree you can't see ornaments on because the branches are so thick and dense?" The Noble fir provides stronger and more widely spaced branches that hold and display ornaments better, he explains.

"I like the holes in them," he comments on the tree's natural gaps. "I actually cut holes into them because I don't like them completely full." Zooming up to an almost perfect specimen, he calls out, "Anybody got any clippers on them? This branch needs to go." Eyeing a pair of scissors, he grabs them and starts pruning.

"The worst thing I've done," he says between clips, "is cut a wire that lit the whole top of the tree. I

had to rewire it." A few minutes later, history repeats itself.

Snip. Hiss. A branch goes dark.

James sighs, barely pausing at the lighting mishap, and continues cutting. "I'll take care of it later," he says, dismissing the chore as just one more item on his holiday to-do list.

Long after his helpers bid all a good night and nestle in their beds with visions of corncobs and peanuts dancing in their heads, James will dash away! dash away! dash away! the long night through.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

## It All Adds Up to Christmas

When creating Blackberry Farm's holiday finery, here's a list of what it takes.

- 8 boxes of florist wire
- 9 Noble fir trees
- 10 bushels of corncobs
- 88 garlands
- 310 wreaths
- 3,600 pinecones
- 22,000 lights

For more information visit [www.blackberryfarm.com](http://www.blackberryfarm.com).