

# Is there more to Christmas trees than meets the eye? Yes.

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Staff Correspondent

**BIRDSBORO** — Christmas trees are beautiful, and once they are trimmed and decorated they become a very joyful part of the Holidays. But, did you ever think about how much work is involved in producing these precious symbols of Christmas?

Americans use approximately 27 million trees a year for holiday decorations, and all of these are harvested in a relatively short time span, lasting a few short weeks. These beloved trees can not be harvested until the weather gets cold and "hardens them off." Then the rush begins to tag, cut, trim, bale, and ship them to waiting wholesalers and retailers across the country before the holiday season arrives.

This year, most of the Christmas trees will be sold before December 17th and 18th, explained Joch Koch, Birdsboro. Koch has been raising Christmas trees for years. This year he will ship between six and seven thousand trees out of state, anywhere between Florida and Maine.

Growing Christmas trees is a long term and often risky business. Many trees aren't harvested until they are 15 to 18 years old as in the case as the Douglas Fir. But faster growing trees such as the Scotch Pine can be harvested several years earlier. The long length of time to raise the trees also poses problems with research and disease control, said Koch. Because it takes so long to find the results of experiments there are some diseases that have not been controlled yet.

Many years of production can be lost if a tree plantation is hit by fire or an uncontrollable disease. Christmas tree production is farming, Koch added, "We just don't get our crop in one year," he explained. And just like other farm operations it helps to have children to do some of the work.

Every tree has to be sheared each year after it is about three feet tall. Shearing is done to attain a good shape and



Christmas trees are being readied for shipment now in preparation for the holiday season which will begin soon.

density. "And," explained the tree producer, "a good man can only shear 500 trees a day at the most."

Most of the work in raising Christmas trees has to be done by hand. There are no mechanical shearers or harvesters. The only mechanical equipment used on the Koch tree plantation is a chain saw to cut the trees and a Christmas tree baler that ties them up. All other work with them is done by hand.

One mistake in shearing the tree means it isn't suitable as a Christmas tree, Koch stated. Taller trees even pose more of a problem since they are harder to reach. With Scotch Pine shearing has to be compressed into a six week period but other trees such as Blue Spruce and Douglas Fir can be sheared anytime during eight months of the year.

When the trees reach a proper harvesting height, which varies between trees by several years, the task of getting them on a truck to be shipped is a tremendous job. It is not unusual for a tree to be ten feet tall and another growing beside it to be only three feet tall explained Koch.

The trees are very sensitive when they are planted as seedlings or transplants and are often stunted for two years before they begin to grow. If they are planted in a

year of drought most will probably be lost, the Christmas tree grower explained.

Fruit growers have many of the same problems with their seedlings. Deer and rodents take their toll on many young trees. Valuable methods of controlling the pest problems have now been outlawed leaving even larger numbers of trees susceptible to the animals. As time increases between plantings, disease and insect problems also increase, Koch continued. For this reason the fields the new trees are planted in are first plowed to help reduce or interrupt the cycles of the insects and diseases.

Koch is also a firm believer in maintaining soil fertility. He fertilizes his ground before each new crop of trees is added.

The work in raising Christmas trees fluctuates greatly between seasons, which contributes towards the difficulty of getting good help. During shearing and harvesting a large work force is needed. But during other times of the year only a base crew is needed. To get away from this problem Koch decided to go into the nursery business as well, although the work still varies greatly.

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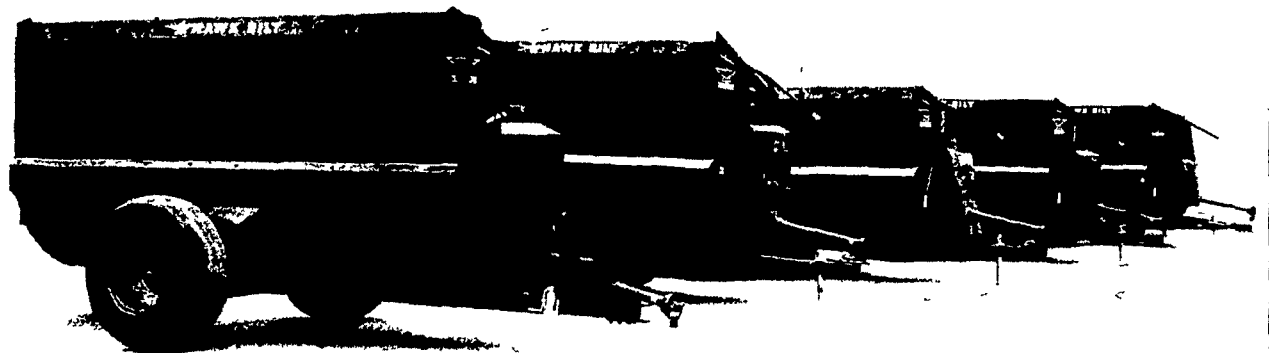
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