

# Penn State forester offers advice to would-be Christmas tree growers

UNIVERSITY PARK — Spurred by nostalgia and the prospects of seemingly easy profits, hundreds of Pennsylvanians in recent years have considered, or tried, growing Christmas trees.

"Many people are in for a rude shock or worse, a severe monetary loss," says James C. Finley, a Penn State instructor of Extension forest resources, who gives advice and aid to the Commonwealth's 350 to 400 commercial Christmas tree growers.

"Too many neophytes think they only need plant seedlings, wait eight to 10 years, depending on species, and begin harvesting an annual Christmas tree crop.

"Few such would-be entrepreneurs bother to learn the realities that make growing Christmas trees a time-consuming, risky financial venture."

Since Christmas trees—properly grown, nurtured and marketed—can be profitable, Finley is trying to warn would-be growers to seek professional advice before they begin. This may prevent a new group of people from suffering the fate of many Christmas tree growers of two decades ago.

In the early 1960s, Pennsylvania was the nation's largest Christmas tree grower, annually harvesting about 4.5 million trees. However,

for a variety of reasons—a major one being that 20 to 30 percent of the nation's Christmas tree market had been captured by artificial trees—Commonwealth growers found themselves with too many trees.

Many growers lost money, and the state's Christmas tree production began a dramatic decline.

Nevertheless, Finley says, then, as now, high quality trees were in short supply. While about 30 million live Christmas trees are sold annually in the United States, the highest demand—and price—are for cone-shaped trees with thick, even foliage.

What trips up many would-be growers, Finley cautions, is the "fine quality" proviso: quality Christmas trees are produced by dint of foresight, planning and hard work—not to mention a bit of luck.

Then there's the financial investment.

"Many neophytes overlook this aspect," says Finley. "Not only must they buy seedlings, but for the first decade or so, they'll get no profit and their land will be tied up."

"Other realities are the time and money needed for maintenance. Many novices are unprepared for the disease or insect problems that can decimate or severely damage

entire plantations. Few know of the destruction done by weather, birds, rodents, or deer, or of some trees' inability to adapt to a site. Often, only 40 to 60 percent of a grower's trees are marketable."

Many new Christmas tree growers don't know that, for optimum tree growth, the land must be limed and fertilized. Pesticides must be applied annually to minimize predator and disease losses.

And expensive machinery is needed to spray the trees, to mow weeds and to harvest and transport the crop. Usually, to increase the number of high quality trees, each tree must be limed and shaped at least five times during its growth cycle.

Also, to be successful, growers must avoid common mistakes: such as mixing certain species, thereby encouraging pest growth;

choosing species that make popular Christmas trees, but are less hardy and susceptible to certain diseases; and being unaware which species require specialized care or hold their needles longest.

"Finally," Finley says, "growers must have good road

access to their forests or plots, in order to maintain plantings and to harvest the crop.

"And, if their trees are near a major highway—a desirable location for major producers as well as small cut-your-own tree operations—growers must beware of theft."

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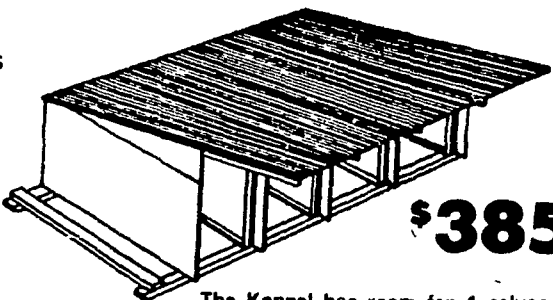
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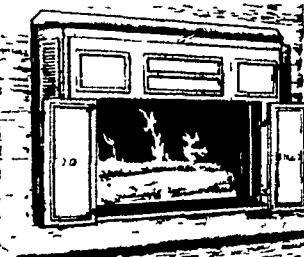
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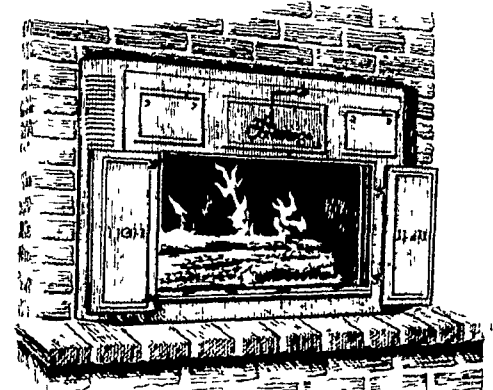
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