

Christmas Trees Year-Round Business for Schuylkill Farmers

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Christmas trees are big business in Schuylkill County and the growers there are determined to let everyone know of the top quality of their live trees. Although there are many part-time growers in the county with a few acres of trees, there are several growers who have turned their businesses into full-time occupations for them, and for over 10 employees during the Christmas season.

"They're quality growers," George Perry, Schuylkill County Extension Agent, stated. "They're proud of their product. It's a pleasure to work with these people, and they're willing to work with you," Perry explained that the

growers of the 2500 plus acres of Christmas trees are continually striving for healthy, growthy trees.

Last year, Pennsylvania was second only to New York in the number of trees planted. There were over eight million trees planted in Pennsylvania alone and only one million harvested. Tree growers are very conscientious about replanting, and predictions are that it is this replanting that will give the best crop in history this season.

"The thing that makes the Christmas tree unique is that it is purchased once a year," stated Roger Tobias, R1, Pine Grove. A past president of the Pennsylvania Christmas tree Growers Association, Tobias is in-



Workmen were busy "baling trees" at Omler's farm. A machine is used to wrap the tree in twine to prevent any breakage to the limbs when it is shipped. After the twine is cut, the branches flare out just as if taken from the field.



Burt Bachert stands in front of his trees. He boasts continual customers for 30 years and said he always runs short of trees.



Bill Omler shows the seeds for the Christmas trees. "Here's where they start," he said. At Omler's, seedlings are also graded for size and quality and only the best are planted.

strumental in publicizing his industry statewide and nationally. He has been featured in Newsweek as well as the major publications of his industry. A delegate to the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau on the Agricultural Nursery and Greenhouse Crops Committee, and currently serving on the Board of Directors of the Pa. Christmas Tree Growers Association, Tobias constantly tries to educate homeowners on the proper selection and care of their tree.

In referring to the fire hazard publicity, a live tree often generates in the news, Tobias stated. "The record shows that there have been more fires caused by the artificial trees (shorting out) than by any other. The quality tree grower will not cut his trees until there has been sufficient rain." Tobias explained that this keeps the trees fresh for the homeowner.

This year the growers admitted they are running late for the Christmas season since the rains came late. "It's (the weather) hurting us badly and I don't think the trend is going to change," Tobias said.

Bill Fetherolf, manager of Pioneer Evergreen Farms, R1, Orwigsburg, echoed the same complaints.

"We're having everything against us," he stated, explaining that with the drought many seedlings were lost and now at the harvesting season the weather is too warm. "There's too much temperature contrast," he continued. "We try to monitor our quality and watch the freshness of the tree," he stated.

Pioneer Evergreen Farm is owned by Fetherolf's mother and his uncle, Glenn Kimmel. They retail and wholesale their trees, selling between six and nine thousand trees a year. Started in 1943 by his father, Fetherolf stated that he was born and raised around Christmas trees. He stated, "People are more quality conscious. They never realized they (the trees) were of such high quality."

Fetherolf and Tobias gave the following recommendations for caring for live trees:

1. In selecting the tree, bend the needles. If they bend instead of break, you have a fresh tree.
2. Keep your tree outside and cold until ready to decorate.
3. "Treat your live Christmas tree as you would cut flowers," Tobias stated. Make a fresh cut in the trunk and place in fresh water. They may drink two quarts or more a day. Keep the base of the tree immersed in water. "Once the water has gone below the butt on



Several of the growers advocated the "Stand-Straight" system for setting up the trees. Bill Omler demonstrates how it works. The tree is aligned and a hole is drilled in the trunk. The tree is placed on a peg in the stand and automatically stands straight.

the tree, it's too late," Tobias states. "The tree has sealed itself." But he adds that if properly watered, as long as the tree keeps drawing water, it will be fire resistant.

4. Check your lights and wiring for worn spots and cracks. Take care not to overload the electric circuits. Use common sense and keep wax candles and open flames away from your tree. Lights should

not be left on when you are not at home.

5. Do not decorate your tree with cotton, paper, or other materials that burn readily.

Bill Omler, Christmas tree grower, R1, Schuylkill Haven, said, "I'm not worried about the competition from Pennsylvania, I'm worried about it in other states."

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