

# Holidays signal busy time for Christmas tree growers

BY SUZANNE KEENE

RAWLINSVILLE — No holiday decorating scheme would be complete without a towering evergreen laden with glistening lights and colorful ornaments. But a lot of work goes on behind the scenes before a Christmas tree is ready for the living room.

Lancaster County Christmas tree growers Hershey and Jean Ressler say it takes about nine to 15 years to raise an evergreen, depending on the height desired. During those years, the trees need sprayed and pruned to assure a high quality product.

The Resslerers have been growing Christmas trees since 1966 when they purchased 38 acres from a neighbor. The Boy Scouts had already planted about an acre of evergreens on the land, but the trees had never been trimmed. Hershey and Jean decided to trim the trees and started harvesting them about two years later.

They also started planting seedlings in their own seed beds,

until they had 15 acres of trees at various stages of growth. The Resslerers purchase seedlings about the size of a pen and plant them in prepared seed beds. After about two or three years, they are ready to be transplanted to the field.

When the trees are about five or six years old, or four or five feet tall, they need to be trimmed or sheared. "Trimming is very important in the shape of the tree," Hershey explains.

Hershey does most of the shearing himself with hedge shears. He starts at the top and trims any stray branches that would ruin a tree's beauty in the eyes of the prospective Christmas tree buyer. It's very time-consuming, he says, noting that it is also a tiring task.

The Resslerers have learned a lot about raising Christmas trees since they first started. "We learn as we go," Jean said, adding "We're still learning."

Much of their knowledge has come from experience, but they



Hershey and Jean are busy unloading Christmas trees transported from their fields nearby. Working as a team is a way of life for the Resslerers who say they split some jobs and work together on others.

have also benefited from membership in the Christmas Tree Grower's Association. Through membership in the Association, they have had the opportunity to visit other tree farms and to learn from other growers who are willing to share their knowledge.

Knowledge about spraying is also important to raising quality trees, Hershey emphasizes. "That is a very important factor in growing trees."

Three years ago, the Resslerers had trouble with spider mites in some of their trees. At first they thought the mites had affected only about 30 trees, but on further investigation, they discovered that the mites had infiltrated many other trees.

They called on the extension for advice and by applying the proper insecticide were able to salvage the trees.

Hershey has taken a short course on spraying at Penn State, and he takes a refresher course every three years to stay abreast of changes.

Because the Resslerers have a relatively small tree farm, they do nearly all of the labor themselves, much of it by hand. Before retiring, the Resslerers had to hire people to help with the tree farm, but now they do most of the work themselves.

Hershey and Jean work as a team, splitting some of the chores and working together on others. Together they hand plant each of



Customers keep coming back to the Resslerers for fresh trees. Here they show some of this year's outstanding crop.

the seedlings, carefully packing down the dirt around each one.

They plant the trees in five foot squares in a checkerboard pattern to enable them to mow in either direction. They also fertilize their trees once a year to achieve better color and apply lime at the rate of five tons per acre.

Because they are so small and can give the trees more individual attention than larger growers, they lose very few trees to disease or insects. Out of 1,000 trees they lost only about seven, Hershey said.

Most of the trees we plant, grow," Jean added.

The holiday season is the busiest time for the Resslerers. Even though they are both retired now they still have to hire a few people to help with the additional work load. Hershey takes care of the cutting, while Jean handles the customers.

Jean said they do not start selling trees until the first week in December, and don't harvest them until a day or two before they will be sold.

Freshly cut trees is our biggest asset," Jean notes. People know we don't cut our trees early, she continued. "They know they're getting a fresh tree."

Customers come from surrounding areas, including Lancaster city, to purchase the Resslerer's fresh trees. They raise and sell mostly Douglas and Frazer firs, Scotch pine and blue spruce, but they do have a few Concolors.

In the past they have allowed customers to select their trees before cutting, but so many people

changed their minds about which tree they wanted and when they wanted it, that the Resslerers have discontinued that practice.

Now in October they walk through their trees, placing a red tag on every tree that must be cut and a white one on trees that can be cut if they are needed.

Large trees are more popular with their customers than small ones, but people living in apartments or trailers often want a smaller evergreen, Jean noted.

"It's amazing the number of people who want large trees," Jean said.

Because the big trees are more in demand, the Resslerers harvest more large trees. "We sell just what we grow," Jean said, explaining that they do not buy trees from other growers even if they run short themselves.

The only other product the Resslerers have to sell is a Christmas tree stand that features a pin in the center. They bore holes in the tree trunks for customers so that the tree will be sure to stand straight, even if it has a crooked trunk.

Because she is so busy over the holiday season, Jean puts her Christmas tree up the third week in November. To keep her tree fresh as long as possible, Jean says she makes sure it has plenty of water, especially during the first two weeks.

And Jean will continue to be busy from now until Christmas Eve, helping families eager to find the perfect centerpiece for their holiday decorations.



The Resslerers take pride in offering their customers only fresh trees. This sign in their front yard urges customers to check out their product.



Hershey helps customer H.C. Wesley Jr. load his tree into his car. Wesley says he comes to Rawlinsville from Lancaster each year to get his tree from the Resslerers.