

Rows of Yule trees stripe Delta grower's fields

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DELTA — From the rolling hills that wrap around the classic bank barn and roomy house on the Joseph Kilgore farm, the air feels fresh, clear, clean. But through the refreshing outdoor scents of damp grass and moist soil hangs another fragrance.

Unmistakably, it's the smell of Christmas.

Joseph Kilgore is a Christmas tree grower. Corn and hay crops, feed for the Guernseys once housed in the lower level of the barn, have been replaced with precise rows of pine, fir and spruce that stripe the hillside like lines of silent sentinels.

A modest and quiet-spoken man, Kilgore recalls that he never really planned on getting into this sideline. What he did was to simply plant a few evergreens some years ago on a bit of farmland not suitable for growing field crops.

In time, the seedlings matured to Christmas tree size, and Kilgore sold a few one holiday season. When it proved to be an enjoyable venture, he opted to plant a few more, this time setting out the planting on some of the farm's better soils.

That was 15 years ago. Each spring now finds him carefully planting between two and three hundred baby evergreens over the twelve acres of trees.

What is more fascinating is that

most of the seedlings, now transplanted each year, are started from seed by the retired dairyman.

While Christmas trees are a relatively hardy crop, growing them from seed takes extra attention. It begins with the harvest of the cones, a sort of art in itself.

Cones, the seed pods of evergreens, ripen at different times in the various species. Scotch pines, perennially popular Christmas tree type, have cones ready for harvest after the December holidays. Seeds of the fir species mature in late summer. And while Scotch pines yield seeds annually, species like white pine and Douglas fir only set seed every three or four years.

"And when the seeds are ready, you'd better get them off," Kilgore advises from experience.

It takes warmth to coax the cones open, which allows the seeds, located near the center, to loosen and fall from the cone segments. Large commercial firms, like the Weyerhaeuser paper corporation, have specialized equipment for cone harvest. In commercialized harvesting, the cones are heated and tumbled to remove the seeds.

After harvesting the cones, Kilgore stores the fresh seed in a cold, dry location until corn planting season. Then it goes into specially prepared, raised nursery beds maintained near the entrance to Kilgore's evergreen acreage.

Before planting, nursery beds are sterilized by pouring a commercial product over the well-dampened soil. Sterilization eliminates many of the weed seeds, and helps to control the seedling disease damp-off.

Germination of evergreen seeds is a sporadic occurrence. Some Scotch pine seeds might sprout within two weeks, while others continue to show through the ground for many weeks afterward. Some may even lay dormant for a year before poking tiny green needles through the nursery bed soil.

Such irregularity of seed sprouting underscores a key to the personality of tree growers: it takes a person of patience and farsightedness to crop trees. This harvest is not ready in a few months time—or even a few years.

Scotch pine seedlings remain in the nursery beds for two years. Other species usually grow there a year longer.

When transplanting size, several inches high, is reached, the seedlings are moved to their permanent field location. A short stub, remains of the trunk of its predecessor, may mark the planting spot. Kilgore prefers to plant as early in spring as possible in ground that is uniformly moist, not overly wet or dry.

After three more years of field growth, young trees may need an initial trimming to eliminate a double top. By the following season, they will have matured to a size to be included in the annual overall trimming that determines the traditional Christmas tree shape, with compact and full branches.

"No more than a foot between sets of branches is what you want," the tree grower recommends. "I try not to cut anything but the new growth."

Trimming therefore must be worked at the right time of year, to encourage young growth and branching in the proper direction. Pines are pruned from the middle of June through the middle of July, while spruce and fir type can be left for a bit later in the season.

Even after trimming chores evergreen plantings demand attention. Clipped grass can make the difference between healthy and sickly trees, since tall grass growth inhibits air movement and thus encourages diseases.

A specialty walk-behind mower, for use in high grasses, is Kilgore's trimming tool. On just one hillside planting, the hundred rows of trees run a length of about a quarter-mile and are mowed at least four, sometimes five times each summer. A quick guess by Kilgore is that he walks about fifty miles each time he mows the tree planting.



After a few years in the nursery beds, Joseph Kilgore's evergreen seedlings are thick with needles and ready for transplanting to permanent field locations.



Joseph Kilgore prefers to cut his Christmas trees about a half-inch above the ground, eliminating stump leftovers and giving customers plenty of trunk for fastening in holders. Sometimes he gets a hand from man's best friend.

Spending that much time with the tree crop lends a side benefit. Kilgore can keep careful watch on the planting, even though he has never yet found it necessary to spray for disease or pest infestation.

"But bagworms are sometimes a problem," he adds. "If I see a tree with bagworms while I'm mowing, I just stop and pick them off."

Locating evergreen plantings on sloping ground further aids air movement. A fairly rich soil enables the trees to grow and look their best, and Kilgore adds that Christmas tree species will not do well in heavy, clay-like ground.

Weather extremes can create problems, as occurred two years

ago, when a dry summer was followed by a bitter cold winter. Young trees were especially susceptible. Some died, and the top growing leader froze in many more. While a new growing tip can be directed through trimming, that adds another year or two to the tree's harvest maturity.

Wildlife cause relatively few problems, although rabbits may nibble off tender seedlings and deer occasionally damage one side of a tree by rubbing against the branches.

Kilgore and his sister Dorothy, who also lives on the farm, often use such trees for their own holiday decoration. In fact, a slightly one-sided pine or fir may

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Patti Hushon and her husband, Dan, rent the Kilgore farm's dairy facilities and lend a hand with the Christmas tree sales. She is especially fond of the lovely hollies that Joseph has grown from seed on his Delta farm.



From high on the hill above the Kilgore farm, Joseph can scan the 12 acres planted to pines, firs and spruces.

Homestead Notes