



Jerry and Eleanor Barker will take several Christmas trees to this year's Farm Show. Here they admire some of the cut trees they had for sale during the holidays.

Jerry Barker is cutting best trees for Farm Show

BY BETSY STITT
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WILLIAMSBURG — While other Pennsylvania farmers are loading up their livestock for the trip to Farm Show, Jerry Barker of Williamsburg is cutting down his best Christmas trees.

Barker has been taking his trees to Farm Show every year, and this year is no exception. He's planning to exhibit a Douglas fir, a white pine, a Scotch pine, and a white spruce.

"We do not raise a special tree for the Farm Show," Barker reported. "We just pick out the nicer ones as the shearing is done."

Barker is a member of the Pennsylvania and National Christmas Tree Growers Associations and is a past director of the state association. Both Jerry and his wife, Eleanor, say they learned everything they know about Christmas trees at association meetings.

The meetings provide growing information, influence legislation and help promote sales, Jerry says.

Unlike many other types of agriculture, Christmas tree farms have not been hit with a severe economic pinch. Jerry said production is expanding and he sees new faces at every association meeting he attends.

Most are talking about getting into the industry on a small scale, primarily by retailing their trees.

Barker says he has seen more competition here from the southern states, but adds, "Maybe I am optimistic, but I haven't seen good quality trees from the south. I see an expanding market for good quality trees in the southern market."

Barker started growing

Christmas trees in 1950 as a hobby while he ran Keystone Milling in Williamsburg. After he retired from the mill, he turned the hobby into a full-time career.

Currently, Barker has 200 acres of Christmas trees. With 1,600 to 1,700 trees per acre, he has his work cut out for him. Fortunately for Jerry, his family willingly supports him with their help.

Barker sells the trees both wholesale and retail. Approximately 10,000 trees are sold wholesale; some stay in Pennsylvania, but many go into New Jersey, Maryland and the Washington D.C. area.

In the retail market, Jerry sells approximately 2,000 trees. For those who like to go into the field and cut their own, he offers a wide variety to select from.

Barker also offers cut trees for people who don't like to cut their own.

There's a tree to suit almost everyone's taste at Barkers. They grow pines, firs and spruce. Of the three types of pines grown — Scotch, white and Austrian — Scotch is the most popular.

They also grow three types of spruce: blue, Norway and white. Spruce tend to hold their needles better than other trees.

Three varieties of firs are also offered. They are Concolor; Fraser, which is growing in popularity; and Douglas firs, which are the most popular of all the Christmas trees.

When people come searching for a Christmas tree, Barker said, they want trees six to seven feet tall, with good color and full branches. In other words, he said, they want a perfect tree.

"There just isn't a perfect tree, but we try to make them as close as possible," he said.

One of the ways they do this is to shear every tree every year. Barker said it takes a crew of 16 people six weeks to trim all the trees. A crew of girls shear trees up to four feet, while a crew of boys trim the taller ones. Most of the employees are students at Williamsburg High School.

Barker also sprays the trees for insects and diseases. Scotch pines, he said, are difficult to grow and must be sprayed four times a year because of their susceptibility to diseases.

Weed control is another important part of raising Christmas trees. Barker sprays for weeds and mows all summer.

Although he cannot change the type of soil he has, Barker does try to control pH and fertility, especially for the fir trees.

Weather is another factor important to growing Christmas trees. Moisture is needed after the trees are planted. But once the trees are established, they can take a dry spell without much damage.

A late freeze can be very damaging to trees with early bud break. It will stunt the growth for that season.

This harvest season, the weather has not been kind to Barker. It has been extremely wet and has slowed cutting of the trees and getting them out of the fields.

"I think this is the wettest, muddiest, season I can remember, Barker says.

Barker plants approximately 25,000 trees every year, with the average tree taking from seven to eight years until it is ready to be cut. Some may take as long as 10 years to reach cutting stage.

"This is a nice business for someone who likes to grow things and be outside," Barker said.



Tom Murtiff drives a tractor and wagon to bring successful tree hunters Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Parsons of Petersburg back from the fields.

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