

# For, Some, It's Never Too Early To Look At Christmas Trees

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Special To Lancaster Farming

LITITZ (Lancaster Co.) — Jackets and umbrellas gave way to sunglasses and notepads just in time for the start of the day-long seminar on Christmas tree production Thursday, June 3. The Capitol Region of the Pa. Christmas Tree Grower's Association (PCTGA) held the training meeting for the Lebanon-Lancaster area conifer growers in their ongoing program to educate, inform, and update affiliates in all aspects of the Christmas tree industry.

Hosted by Elizabeth Farms, a part of the historic Coleman Estate in the lovely rolling hills of northern Lancaster County and southern Lebanon County, the setting was perfect for a fine spring outing.

The Coleman's were important in PA history for the iron production so vital to the development of the country. Elizabeth Farms, having a total of 1800 acres, has at present 350 acres in Christmas trees of many varieties and 60 additional acres under cultivation, including soybeans, sorghum, and some pastureland.

Pierce is in his tenth year of developing the tree farm on the estate. The partnership of owners, Francis Coleman and his nephew, William Coleman, recently delegated Craig, son of Francis, and his new bride, Kris, as live-in manager-trainees of the farms. They recently moved here from

New York City.

The young couple drove tractors that pulled the guests touring the farm and their enthusiasm was quite evident.

In addition to Frank Pierce and his wife, Joanna, who helps with the books and the mowing, there is a family living in one of the farm houses and six helpers from Mexico, some of whom stay to help in the harvest season. Other part-time and seasonal help are hired.

Since the farm is comparatively new on the conifer production scene, saleable trees are only recently being marketed. In 1992, 8,000 cut trees were sold. This season, Pierce hopes to sell some dug trees (B & B). Of course, like any other endeavors so dependent on weather and so many other unpredictable factors, Pierce readily admits he really can't predict anything.

"I was supposed to tell you what I would have done differently if I could do it over, but I still don't know what I'm doing so I can't tell you," he jokingly tells his guests.

Sporting greens of every shade and tone, the long rows of seedlings and ready-for-market specimens drew the eyes along gently rolling slopes and merged low mountains in the background. Elizabeth Farms grows at present, 350,000 trees of Pennsylvania's 42 million trees grown for Christmas trees.

As guests arrived, they labeled themselves with nametags and

fortified themselves with coffee and doughnuts. A mini-trade show was set up so interested growers could drool over the newest equipment. Pruning and shearing knives, sprayers, mowers, and the latest accessories were there with their representative salesmen.

By 9:30 A.M., all the early morning evidence of the forecasted rain had dissipated and the organizers breathed a collective sigh of grateful relief.

Almost 200 registrants were greeted by Alan Michael, the multi-county horticultural specialist who serves this region's farmers.

The group climbed aboard four farm wagons pulled by tractors. In the Christmas tree sales season, the customers are delighted to be taken from pine field to fir or spruce field in these wagons pulled by matched teams of Percherons but for this occasion, the tractors would have to serve.

Divided into groups, the wagons stopped at various stations of the farm where instruction would be offered in many interests. At one location, Scott Guiser of the Penn State Extension service explained a simplified way to calibrate hand sprayers.

Dr. Larry Kuhns, the friendly figure familiar to PA Christmas tree growers, shared his latest findings of herbicide use. Several test rows had been sprayed weeks earlier so participants could readily see the results for themselves whether or not different post-emergent sprays damaged trees.

Over the next hill, shearing techniques were demonstrated on a stand of seven foot tall marketable Scots pines. Melissa Piper Nelson, of the PCTGA, introduced the demonstrators. Tom Ressler, manager of Sheerlund Forest on the southern fringe of Reading, demonstrated shearing using knives. Properly protected with heavy full length leg chaps and with the confidence only gained by many years of working with the long-bladed instrument, he quickly slashed away extra growth with his right hand then reached up to nip off the leaders with a sturdy pruning shears to shape the top into just what the customer looks for.

Bill Fetheroff, also with Sheerlund, demonstrated a rotary blade



Tom Ressler of Sheerlund Forests, Reading, demonstrates tree shearing with knives.

attached on the business end of an ECHO weed wacker in place of the line rotator. Swinging it up and down, he made it look easy, even topping the leader with a tap of the blade.

Gerritt Strathmeyer of Strathmeyer Forests, Inc. of Dover, PA, strapped on the ECHO engine back-pack which powers a 72" or 88" reciprocal blade resembling a giant hedge trimmer. Held upright at the exact angle at which you wish to taper the tree, one simply walks around the tree, slicing off everything that sticks out of line. An experienced hand can shear 2,500 trees a day — if there is a water, gas, and an oil boy to service the man, motor, and blade at regular intervals.

With 16" straightedge knives, whirling blades, and hedgeshears as tall as a man, the safety aspect is critical. Plenty of room to work is the rule — with no distractions.

A break for lunch came just in time to quiet hungry bellies of these men and women used to working hard and eating well. The tractors took the groups right up the road to the Brickerville Fire Company where volunteers had prepared hot roast beef sandwiches, soup, etc. and home made pie.

The afternoon featured reps from the PA Dept. of Agriculture and a Pest Workshop. Vance Wagner set up his easel in the middle of a sunny field and drew the eternal triangle of pests: host, environment, and pathogen — all

equal parts in growing bugs. Eliminating one point of the triangle makes it impossible for the bug to survive. The trick is in knowing the how, when and where of changing any of the critical elements.

Walt Blosser and Esther Bach talked about inspecting and scouting the plantation and educating oneself to the destructive creatures and their habits. To add credence to their talks, they had specimens for a show-and-tell or feel-and-squeal display. This knowledgeable duo is out to get each grower to take command of his/her own tree farm to the extent of knowing what is there in the way of pests and how to cope.

Rayanne Lehman and Dr. Paul Heller concluded the day's instruction with further lessons on control of insect pests.

Growing the lovely trees for Christmas celebrations is a hard, time consuming work, whether done for fun or profit, full time or part-time. It is one of those labor-intensive vocations in which one cannot count his own time. The benefits are a healthy environment, good exercise, and enjoyment of watching green things grow. These men and women who farm trees for a crop are hardy and competitive but they are organized and they do love to get together with other friends of their feather and socialize and trade secrets of success. That's exactly what they did at Brickerville and they had a good time.



Bill Fetheroff of Sherlunde Forests, Reading, demonstrates tree shearing with a rotary blade.



About 200 people met at Elizabeth Farms during the Pa. Christmas Tree Growers Association training meeting.



In photo, from left, Scott Mullinex, grand champion; Larry Weaver, judge; and Casey High, reserve champion.

## Spring Preview Show Held

SHIPPENSBURG (Cumberland Co.) — The 11th annual Franklin County Spring Preview Show was held Saturday, June 5, at the Shippensburg Fairgrounds.

Scott Mullinex of Howard County, Md., won the grand champion honor and reserve grand was awarded to Casey High of Lancaster County. Other class winners include Heather and Jus-

tin Fuls of Somerset County and Scott Pugh of Frederick County, Va.

Heather Fuls also won the champion fitter and show plaque, and Eric Berkeimer of Cumberland County won reserve.

Judging the show was Larry Weaver of Lancaster County, who praised the quality of steers shown.