

Fir Trees Foster 'Decoratability' Of Christmas Season

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lake. "They look more like the trees of yesteryear, the kind you harvested out of the woods with Grandpa. They have less insect and disease problems and they're just an all-around nicer tree."

Also, Westlake said he believed the Douglas and Fraser firs are nearly "neck-and-neck" for "keepability," meaning they can withstand the punishment a cut tree goes through from when it is harvested until it is brought home and decorated.

Westlake said that those who harvest trees should remember you are taking a tree that's been in the field under conditions at night where the temperature ranges from 25 degrees to 35 degrees Fahrenheit and you bring it into your 70-degree Fahrenheit house "and you ask this thing to stand there and look pretty and don't drop its needles for four, five, or six weeks of the year. That's a lot to ask from a tree."

But the Frasers have the keepability growers desire, because even when it "turns dead as a doornail and brown as can be, 95 percent of the needles will still stay on the tree." Homeowners have less worry about needles lying about as a result.

Westlake Tree Farms also grows a limited number of White Pine and Blue and Norway Spruce trees.

How trees are accepted by consumers and how well they hold up inside the house are factors driving decisions growers make when they plant. Westlake said he has worked with the firs long enough to pick the soil and slope conditions necessary to generate a good stand.

Westlake answers the questions people ask about the season, particularly when they wonder, if the Christmas tree season is only one month long, what does he do the remaining 11 months of the year? There is a lot of work to be done all

year long, he tells them. Mostly, it involves post-season management (cutting up returned trees after the season), then planting, mowing (all rows get mowed on a regular basis), fertilizing, spraying, and, throughout the summer, hand shearing.

Westlake employs three full-time people year-round, including two field workers and one mechanic. During Christmastime, the business employs 25 part-time people, mostly high school and college students to help with wreath-making, garland-making, cutting, and other chores.

The summer months are filled with hand-shearing all the trees, until the season kicks in, which starts in October, as the farm gears up for another busy season.

The cut-your-own business is particularly busy right after Thanksgiving, when horse- and tractor-drawn wagons begin to take people near the fields to harvest trees. But there is more to this event than just cutting trees.

"This is really an event," said Westlake. "This is not just going to (your local convenience store) and buying a jug of milk. This is a whole family-planned event, whole neighborhoods get together, or several homes on the same street get together to come out. Christmas would not be complete without coming and cutting their own Christmas tree."

Westlake said the afternoon-long event is notable because the farm provides more than just the attraction of a visit to a farm and a Christmas tree. They also feature craft shows, quartets, and other events.

About half the tree farm customers are from the Philadelphia suburbs, and the rest from Chester and surrounding counties. The business was built mostly by word-of-mouth, according to Westlake.

E. B. Westlake, Jr. purchased the land to operate the tree farm in

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A combination of factors, according to Westlake, make fir trees more desirable as a cut tree during the holiday season. Gary Westlake, a Delaware Valley College graduate who put most of his life into growing trees, stands in a field of Douglas firs. The farm maintains more than 45,000 Christmas trees on about 180 acres (including 20 acres of rented ground) off of Rt. 23, near the quaint northern Chester County town of St. Peters. Photo by Andy Andrews.



Children from the Westmont Christian Academy in Pottstown took a ride to see the Christmas Trees at Westlake Tree Farms a few weeks before the holiday began.



An old hay barn, built in the late 1700s and reconstructed at the turn of the century, was remodeled into a retail outlet in 1991. Gary Westlake stands in the outlet, which has about 4,000 square feet of space for ornaments and other items for the holiday season.



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