

# Quality Seedlings, Shearing, Fresh Cut Trees Hallmarks Of Schuylkill Forest Farm

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Bruce Bachert, Sr. and family, including Harvey, his uncle, and Bruce's family still carry on the tradition of purchasing quality seedlings and maintaining the practices that Bruce's great-grandfather began and perfected at Schuylkill Forest Farm.

"Growers from all over the state used to come here to see what he used to practice," said Bruce Bachert during an interview at his 253-acre Christmas tree farm in the heart of Hawk Mountain Valley, along the southern ridge of Schuylkill County. Bruce grows about 135 acres of five varieties of Christmas trees on three different tracts of land in the Mill Mountain and Hawk Mountain region.

Bruce said that quality is more important than quantity in the operation. This is a hallmark started by his great-grandfather, John Bachert.

The technique of shearing would impress growers, because "a lot of people years back used to just take the wild trees, they wouldn't shear them, they wouldn't do anything with them," he said. "They would just go out in the woods and cut wild trees."

Bruce said the Bacherts were the first in the area to actually cultivate Christmas trees just like corn to a grain farmer. They were the first to "put the trees in the ground just for tree production."

"A lot of people in the area do it now," said Bruce. "It's a thriving business."

Bruce said the business is very manual-labor intensive. Big equipment has little or no place in the business because of the exacting nature of maintaining the individual trees.

"It's an industry that you've got to like," said Bruce. "If you don't like it, I mean, you're not in it for long. Believe me."

Bert Bachert, Bruce's uncle, took over the business from John Bachert in 1954. For 37 years, Bert Bachert ran the business until it

was purchased by Bruce in spring of this year.

The Bacherts, who farm with Bruce, Sr., wife Jean, and sons Bruce, Jr., Joel, Jared, and Bret, maintain about 135 acres of Christmas trees. They grow mostly firs, including Douglas and Frazer. Also, they grow several varieties of spruce and also Scotch Pine.

In addition, they maintain 15 acres of hay for several horses.

Most of the Christmas trees are grown for bulk wholesale to markets in New Jersey and Philadelphia. They manage a small local retail operation. About 90 percent of their business is cut trees for wholesale, but they also make wreaths, garlands, and bows for the season, according to Jean Bachert.

From spring until mid-June, stump removal, cultivation, and seedling planting (from reputable local dealers) are undertaken by the Bacherts. From mid-June until Thanksgiving, the trees are sheared. Beginning at Thanksgiving, cutting begins. By the beginning of December, cutting is a full-time chore, beginning at 7 in the morning and often lasting until past midnight.

"We started right before Thanksgiving," said Jean Bachert. "Our first orders went out Thanksgiving Day. And it's been a rush ever since."

At the day of the interview, the Bacherts were busy cutting and baling 200 Douglas Fir trees at a 70-acre parcel in the Hawk Mountain Valley for shipment to a market in the Bronx, N.Y. Orders of hundreds of trees were still being filled, and the cutting continues until about four days before Christmas.

The Douglas Firs are about 12 years old and range in height from 6-8 feet. Schuylkill Forest Farms cuts trees ranging from "tabletop" size at 4 feet, up to 14-foot trees purchased by churches, civic organizations, and others.

Trees are carefully notched to



Bruce, right and Jean Bachert maintain this 150-acre Christmas tree farm in the heart of Mill Mountain, along the southern ridge of Schuylkill County. Bruce grows a wide variety of Christmas trees on three different tracts of land in the Mill Mountain and Hawk Mountain region. Photo by Andy Andrews

indicate "seconds," because of discoloration, unevenness, or other factors that may indicate a lack of quality. The trees are wrapped by a "baler," then stacked in a hay wagon, and eventually loaded into a tractor-trailer for shipment.

Quality is utmost in the minds of the growers. Jean Bachert pointed to one tree that was slightly open near the bottom. "It might look perfect in someone else's eyes, but my husband says *that's* a second," she said.

"I try to deal with quality instead of quantity," said Bruce Bachert. "That's what my uncle always used to stress. If you deal with quality, he used to say, you don't have to deal with the numbers."

Fortunately, since the glut of poor Western-type trees of the late 1980s and early 1990s ruined some demand for fresh cut trees, growers have been faced with carefully rebuilding their niche in a now sometimes overloaded market.

"It seems like things are turning around, again," he said. "I'm in



Bruce Bachert, Jr., right, uses a chainsaw to notch the trunk of a Douglas Fir while grandfather Harvey watches. The Douglas Firs are about 12 years old and range in height from 6-8 feet. Schuylkill Forest Farms cuts trees ranging from "tabletop" size at four feet, up to 14-foot trees purchased by churches, civic organizations, and others.

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Chainsaws are used by Bruce Bachert, Jr. to notch the center of the trunk on the Christmas tree.



Harvey Bachert, right and grandson Bruce harvested 200 Douglas Fir trees on this tract in the Hawk Mountain Valley. The Bacherts, with full-time help from Randy Martin, were busy cutting and baling 400 Douglas Fir trees at a 70-acre parcel in the Hawk Mountain Valley for shipment to a market in the Bronx, N.Y. Orders of hundreds of trees were still being filled, and the cutting continues until about four days before Christmas.