

# Fraser Fir Stands Tall On Pennsylvania Christmas Tree Farm

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decorations to be placed on many places in the tree. In addition, he said, the Fraser holds the needles well.

Rush and wife Jeanne manage two farms in Chester County comprising 60 acres of Christmas trees, and grow Frasers on almost a third of the acreage. They farm a total of 180 acres, including landscape stock, at the wholesale and retail farm.

Shanahan began farming with about three acres of Christmas trees in Honey Brook in 1965. The farm once was devoted to grain crops for the local dairy industry, once a prominent industry more than 30 years ago. Now, many once fertile cropland in the county has been turned to development.

Shanahan grows about 60 acres of Christmas trees at two locations, including a farm about two miles away. Altogether, he cares for about 180 acres in Christmas and landscape trees, including maples, dogwoods, and others.

Farm, Honey Brook. Materials for decoration come from Zieger's in Reading.

The wreaths range in price from \$24-\$32, noted Jeanne Shanahan.

The Shanahans have help full-time from John Wright, a veteran of Christmas tree farms in the area, having worked for a once-prominent local grower, Proctor Wetherill, for 30 years. Wright is in charge of operating the baler, drives tractor, and does all-around general farm work during the busy holiday season. Seasonal work is also provided by Bill Burke, Wendy Flerx, and Rob Ray.

For years the Shanahan Christmas Tree Farm has donated trees to Immaculata College in Malvern. According to Carlos Rivera, groundskeeper for the college, the trees — including one eight footer, eight three-footers, and 10 six-footers — are placed in the chapels and throughout the entire campus. Recently Rivera was instrumental in placing a 28-foot tree in the



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The "choose and cut" farm offers trees from five feet to 15 feet high. At left is Jeanne Shanahan.

More than two thirds of the trees grown at the farm are Douglas Fir, a very popular Christmas tree variety noted for its soft, durable needles; good, green color; and easy care. About a third of the Christmas tree acreage is in Fraser fir.

They also sell Colorado Blue Spruce, white pine, and Concolor fir at the farm.

The "choose and cut" farm offers trees from five feet to 15 feet high. Customers can park their car and go into the field to cut down a tree. They can drag it back themselves or Shanahan can help them transport it back on the back of a hay wagon. The tree is shaken and wrapped at the farm.

Three generations of families come to Honey Brook to choose and cut their trees at Shanahans.

Wreaths are made by Herman Wolfe, using material from discarded trees. Wreaths are available in many combinations from 12 inches to 18 inches in diameter. The wreaths are decorated by Yvonne England, England's Herb

rotunda of the college.

Inside the showroom at the farm, trees of different varieties and sizes are suspended from rafters for customers who don't want to pick and cut their own.

Shanahan said that many customers are local, but some travel from the Philadelphia Main Line, New York, Wilmington, and Lancaster city to choose and cut trees at the Christmas tree farm.

The big challenge for the growers before the holiday season are the months of shearing and shaping the trees using a variety of methods, including hedge shears, a shearing wand, and sickle shear.

Shearing begins about June 15 and continues on until Thanksgiving. Trees not finished in time for the growing season are trimmed after Christmas.

Ideally, said Shanahan, shearing is finished by Labor Day.

"But I've never done it," he said.

According to John Wright, the trees needed to be shaped throughout the year in preparation for the

season. The shaping makes them "look like Christmas trees," said Wright.

A big challenge for growers is facing the competition from little "backyard" growers, said Wright. "They've been starting to come in," he said.

Trees are also fertilized with a foliar application of 10-20-10, noted Shanahan.

He said "everything grew really nicely this year," with enough rains in the spring. For seedlings, rain is crucial early in the year. If, after planting, you get no water in April and May, he said, "you're in

trouble." Shanahan said he used to irrigate in the 1960s, but quit irrigating long ago.

Although dry weather persisted in the middle of the summer, the crop stayed green and lush.

A worry for all Christmas tree growers is fungus, especially for the Douglas Fir. It's also important that the firs receive lots of sunshine — "you don't shade a Douglas," he said. "It will be a brown stick."

The dry weather has created a lot of needle shedding into late September. Last year's needles, on some trees, remains.

However, Shanahan said a good "Northeaster," with wind and rain,

would go a long way toward cleaning the trees up.

The farms have good, bottomland-type soil. The main farm is near some prime soils — Lancaster County is literally a short walk away.

In years past, the Shanahans have exhibited trees at the Pennsylvania Farm Show.

The Christmas tree farm and nursery, located off Rt. 10 at Beaver Dam Road near Honey Brook, is open year-round. For the Christmas season, the farm opens for a few days after Thanksgiving (this year, Nov. 28) and is open until Dec. 20, from 9 a.m.-4 p.m.



Again this year the Shanahan Christmas Tree Farm donated trees to Immaculata College in Malvern. According to Carlos Rivera, groundskeeper for the college, left, the trees — including one eight footer, eight three-footers, and 10 six-footers — are placed in the chapels and throughout the entire campus. At right is Rush Shanahan. On top of truck is Bill Burke. Photo by Andy Andrews