

# Grower Grooms

(Continued from Page A1)  
said Shealer on a recent visit to his farm.

The trees are located in one patch that Shealer, extension director for Carbon County, was "saving to put together for a seed orchard."

He joked to family and friends about the patch that "I'd put a tree in the White House someday," said Shealer. "Oh, yeah, some would say. But I groomed that tree for 6-7 years just to put in the White House."

In 2000, Shealer won the grand champion tree at the Farm Show in Harrisburg. That allowed him to qualify for competition at the National Christmas Tree Growers Association Convention in Rochester, N.Y.

In August, Shealer submitted his best tree and won at the contest.

"I've never competed at the national level," he said.

Shealer won a grand champion at the Farm Show in 1992, but because the national show was in Spokane, Wash. that year, the distance prevented Shealer from entering.

"I enjoy competing with my trees," Shealer said.

He grows several just to obtain that handful of "genetically superior specimens."

"They get extra care," he said. "They're fertilized separately, they're hand-sheared and butt-pruned."

Shealer uses a commercial or specially made fertilizer mix depending on soil test recommendations, applied every spring and fall. He soil tests every three years.

Shealer believes in an all-in, all-cut management strategy on each of the 50 acres in production. Instead of cutting select trees, all trees are taken at once to keep the fields clean, disease-free, and to ensure maximum fertility.

In the spring, a preemergent herbicide is used to keep annual weeds down. In the fall, a post program takes care of all perennial weeds.

The farm's hills include a Berks shaley loam with good drainage. Shealer had to weather the 1999 drought, which led to the deaths of hundreds of new seedlings.

But fortunately, not as many trees had to be replaced as Shealer first suspected.

This year growing conditions were ideal. An irrigation well installed in May 2000 wasn't needed.

Shealer grows trees from 5 feet to 18 feet in height. They include Douglas, Fraser, and concolor firs, Norway Spruce, Colorado Blue Spruce, Canaan Fir, White Pine, and Scotch Pine. About 75-80 percent of all tree sales are Fraser or Douglas firs.

Shealer sells mostly wholesale and some retail. Retail sales are at the barn. The cut trees are placed on strand-straight boards in a pin. Customers arrive from all over southeast Pennsylvania, including West Chester, Chester, Fleetwood, Leesport, and Reading.

Shealer also sells trees to a retailer in Staten Island, N.Y.

The herbicide program is careful to keep weed pressure low. "If I had to grow trees in weeds, I wouldn't want to grow them," Shealer said.

One tree had three feet of

growth in one season.

Shealer said two challenges include deer, which destroy trees either by eating or "buck rubbing," and outright theft of trees.

He lost 75 trees in one night to theft. The farm is on constant police patrol.

Shealer knows of one grower who lost 3,000 Fraser fir trees by deer browsing.

"We hunted very hard here," he said. "We kill a lot of deer in season."

The buck rub can be particularly damaging, because many trees won't recover.

In Carbon County alone, growers lost 8,000 trees to deer damage.

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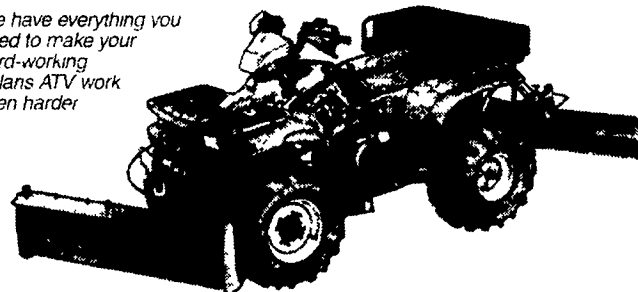


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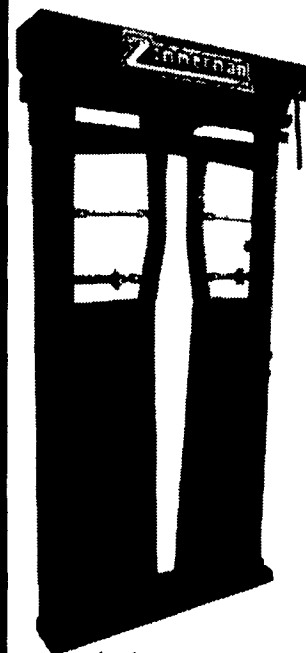
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