

Varner Farm A Favorite Stop

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trees for Rob. When he grew old enough to take over the farm, then, he and his father planted acres of Scotch Pine in the spring of 1993. His first experience with the trees gave him a few important lessons.

"I planted too many trees all at once," he said. "I also didn't know our market. We're primarily a Douglas Fir and Fraser Fir market."

For other growers, Varner recommends calling other landscape, nursery, or Christmas tree operations before planting. "Get to know your market base and what your customers want," he said.

Today the farm hosts 10 fields that are seven acres apiece. A field, after it is opened for cutting, is cut for two years. Each Christmas the Varners open a new "block" of trees.

After the ninth year of use the stumps are cleared, the ground is rototilled, and pumpkins are planted. According to Varner a tree requires seven years to grow six to nine feet.

A Variety Of Offerings

From Easter flowers to field mums to Christmas arrangements the flowers, either loose or finished, not only decorate the store but are for sale much of the year. Pottery, crafts, and craft supplies are also part of the store. Annuals, perennials, or hang-

ing baskets are also offered. Approximately 300 plants are sold as nursery stock for landscape operations by appointment.

The flowers are a contribution of Christine, Varner's wife. Christine, from Schuylkill County, has grown flowers since she was a freshman in college and also ran her own dried flower shop for six years. She has since put her business and flower expertise to work at the family store. The couple met at a produce auction.

Pick-your-own strawberries are one of the summer's first offerings. Tree-ripened peaches, 12 acres of them, also provide picking opportunity for visitors.

Christine and Bob also make peach and strawberry jam to stock store shelves.

In addition five hives provide honey for the store.

If customers can't visit the orchards during the summer, fall brings a time to pick-your-own apples. A cider press provides the fall drink for customers to try for 35 cents a glass, or to take home in larger quantities.

To test the several varieties of apples offered, customers may buy an apple for 45 cents.

Two tractor-drawn wagons and two teams of Belgian horses take visitors to seven acres of pumpkin patch, where they select their own pumpkins.

The Varners have four full-time employees who have a

short break after the rush of Christmas season before coming back to work Jan. 10, when they begin pruning apple trees, plan and organize for the coming year, complete maintenance or construction jobs, or split and sell firewood. Plans for the upcoming season include implementing the vertical axis system on the pick-your-own peach and apple trees.

Fieldwork begins in March. "As soon as we can get in the field, we'll start digging," said Varner.

"We used to be open just at Christmastime," said Varner. "In 1987 I was going to start strawberries. I had the ground worked up and I missed the window for getting them in, so I started research for a crop that I could still get in, so I planted pumpkins," he said. The pumpkin season was augmented by cider, as the Varners started pressing and selling their own cider, and a multi-seasonal business was launched.

"We decided to open for the spring market and expand," Varner said, "Now we usually kick off with Easter flowers. We try to market just what we grow — that's just the way we've always wanted to do it."

Besides the pumpkin people, or the variety of gourds, or the cider press, or double-fenced petting zoo, a cornstalk and hay bale maze entertains children on the farm.

Weekends bring the opportunity for children to paint their own pumpkin or make their own scarecrow. During the week the Varners also host school tours. After students are taken on hay rides around the farm they are given a small pumpkin.

"We talk about the history of the farm," said Varner. "We tell them about the crops on the farm, how long it takes for things to grow, or the benefits of trees."

Not only providing an experience but also adding agriculture education is important. "We try to teach as much as we can about farming," said Varner, who hopes to use the horses for plowing demonstrations.

Christmas Is Coming

"Once October is over, there is a mad rush for two weeks to switch everything to Christmas," said Varner. The business is open seven days a week for the Christmas season.

To beat the holiday rush, the Varners put up Christmas trees in their own home early in the season. "Last year we put five trees in the house," he said.

Twenty men and approximately eight women help part-time during the Christmas crunch time.

"At Christmas time, we have backup of everything. We have to keep things moving. We may do several hundred trees on a Saturday. Everything will run smoothly as long as we don't get backed up on in one area."

Buying a Christmas tree at

the farm fits into their entertainment farm idea. The Varners and employees work to make their customers' tree-picking venture a true holiday experience.

"We provide them with a saw and take them to the fields," said Varner.

Customers cut the tree and bring to the loading station. The trees are shaken with a shaker to get rid of the dead needles before the tree is pulled through a string baler to ready it for easy handling and transport. Workers will also drill a hole in the bottom of the tree so it will sit straight up on a peg on a special tree stand.

When visitors return to the store they hear the strains of Christmas carols and may take some of the free hot chocolate and hot cider, besides a coloring book for the children, that are offered.

Besides the Christmas shop and holiday displays in the store, a train display in the second floor of the store is a draw.

January Planning

January is a month to look back, reflect, and readjust. "A big part of January is deciding what worked and what we did well. We sit down with key employees to try to find the weaknesses and strengths and build on the strengths to try to do better.

"You are going to make a mistake. You just have to move on, you can't ever give up.

"My grandfather used to say, any overnight success takes a minimum of 20 years.

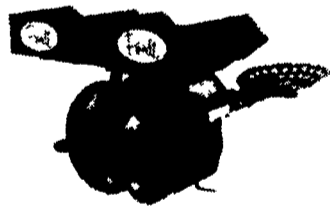
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