

Tannenbaum:

Growing Christmas trees is a year-round job

Story and photos by
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...to the farm... A new sign welcomes visitors to Sandy and Jim Matthes' tree farm. The operation began as a simple attempt to grow nicely-shaped Christmas trees for the Matthes family, but now has grown to where Christmas trees cover more than 50 acres. M & M Trees sells about 100 Christmas trees each year, including several very large trees specially ordered to fill the needs of area churches.

Here it is, only Thanksgiving, and already the early birds are ready for Christmas.

You know who they are: They're people who not only know what to get the people on their Christmas gift list, but who have already made the purchases and perhaps even gift-wrapped them, leaving the rest of us wallowing in our slovenly guilt.

Well, take comfort in this. Most likely the early birds in your life lag well behind Jim and Sandy Matthes, who are among the earliest of the early birds when it comes to Christmas. In fact, they've already begun preparing for Christmas 1998.

They're proprietors of M & M Christmas Trees of Viola. Seedlings take at least eight years to grow into Christmas trees, so trees planted in 1990 will be ready for Christmas ornaments as early as 1998.

M & M Trees originated about 15 years ago in the romantic notions of the Matthes' children, now grown.

"When the kids were little, they wanted Christmas trees cut from the woods" rather than trees purchased commercially, says Sandy. But trees chosen by the children were often misshapen or spindly, and Jim had to drill holes in the trunk to install additional branches and otherwise doctor the trees.

To avoid that he began shaping young evergreens growing on the farm. That was the first step toward M & M Trees.

The Viola Lions Club annually had difficulty buying about 75 Christmas trees to sell as a fund-raiser. Jim volunteered to grow the trees. That effort grad-

ually expanded and the Matthes now cultivate more than 50 acres of Christmas trees, selling about 1,000 trees each year.

"I don't even want to get bigger than 2,000" trees a year, says Sandy. "Maybe not that big. It's a lot of work for a sideline" (to running Matthes Farms, which includes a sales barn in Viola).

Taking care of a Christmas tree plantation begins in April, when the four-inch seedlings are planted.

In order for the tender young seedlings to flourish, weeds, which grow much faster than the seedlings, must be controlled. That effort can begin the previous fall with application of herbicides. A combination of herbicides and mowing controls weeds as the trees grow.

The very bottom branches are trimmed from the trees with hand-held clippers so that trunks will be nice and smooth, both for appearance and easy insertion into stands.

Trees are also fertilized in the spring. Cupfuls of granular fertilizer are spread under each tree's drip line. Rain dripping from the trees washes the fertilizer into the soil.

In June trees are shaped into the classic conical shape. Shearing also causes trees to grow more branches, giving them a fuller shape.

Until last year Jim shaped trees by hacking off branch ends with a machete-like knife. Now a 60-pound motorized sickle attached to a back pack allows the job to be completed more quickly and easily.

The Fourth of July is well before Christmas, but that's when tree farmers must mark

and count trees ready to be harvested, so that growers can tell wholesalers how many trees will be available.

In September trees marked for harvest are sprayed with a solution which helps preserve their green color, since evergreens naturally turn a yellowish tinge in winter. Another agent in the spray helps reduce needle shedding after trees are harvested.

Different species of trees receive different combinations of sprayed chemicals. For example, white, red and Scotch pine require the color-preserving solution, but balsam trees do not. White spruce need both the coloration and needle-holding agents. White pine trees hold their needles very well, so they don't require a needle-holding agent.

For many years Jim sprayed trees with solution carried in a tank strapped to his back. Now Sandy pulls a wheel-mounted tank among the trees with a tractor. Long hoses stretching from the tank allow trees to be easily sprayed.

Jim and Sandy twice each year attend conventions of the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association, an invaluable source of tree marketing and growing ideas. At the conventions growers identify the single item or idea which most improved their operations.

Last year, says Sandy, many growers pointed to the purchase of tree shakers as their biggest single improvement.

A tree shaker is a machine which attaches to a tractor with a three-point hitch. When the stumps of cut trees are placed in the machine the trees are vigorously shaken, dislodging dead, discolored needles

and greatly improving the looks of the trees. A tree shaker is the latest addition to the M & M Trees arsenal of equipment.

The Matthes found good use for the shaker Saturday, Nov. 10, when they harvested 750 of the 1,000 or so trees they will sell this season. Those trees were white, red and Scotch pines. Since they tend to drop needles more easily, spruce trees will be cut about Dec. 1, so they will be as fresh as possible when sold.

Each year M & M Trees directly sells about 350 Christmas trees. Some of those are sold at their rural Viola farm. The rest are sold the first Saturday in December, this year Dec. 1, when they sell trees near the sales barn in Viola. About 50 are sold through two area retailers. The rest are sold to Sandy's nephew, a Christmas tree wholesaler based in Richland Center.

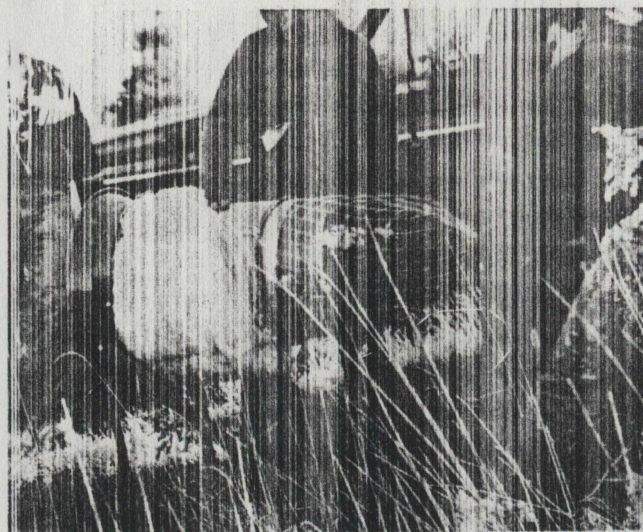
Trees retail for about \$20 each. Price depends on quality more than size, says Sandy.

She also sells wreaths, some as large as five feet across. Her customers must special order wreaths larger than 24 inches.

Wreaths are purchased ready-made, but Sandy personally decorates them. Her second-place finish in a tree producers association tree decorating contest attests to her decorating skills.

Well, there you have it in a nutshell, the entire process of raising Christmas trees. No doubt you'll see this year's Christmas tree in a new light.

And don't worry if you haven't yet begun your Christmas shopping. Most likely the early birds in your life lag well behind Jim and Sandy Matthes when it comes to preparing for Christmas.



...and bale... Dead and loose needles are shaken from freshly cut trees by a shaker. When in use, the machine is attached to a tractor. Sandy Matthes demonstrates how trees are inserted into the device. A freshly-cut Christmas tree is compressed and bundled in netting which allows it to be safely and conveniently sent to market. Processing the tree are, from left, Mike Corwith, Reedsburg, and John Young and Jim Reed, Viola.



Community Sale