



HARVESTING

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When you plant a group of Christmas trees seedlings in one area, they will not all grow at exactly the same rate, partly because of genetic variability in the various tree species, and partly because of microclimatic differences in soil texture, water, nutrients, etc. So expect any year's planting of trees to mature over roughly a three-year period.

Most experienced Kentucky growers say that it takes seven or eight years to grow a 6 ft Christmas tree from a Scots or white pine seedling. The demonstration/research plots initiated by the UK/KSU joint Extension program in Christmas trees were designed to reduce that number by a year or more, if possible. Observation of active private Christmas tree plantations seems to indicate that vegetation control around the seedlings and between the rows may be the single most important factor in reducing total growing time. One grower who has carefully controlled vegetation on his 4-year-old plantation should have some marketable trees in the fifth year.

When October and November come, you should have every thing ready for cutting your trees, especially if you wholesale them rather than using a "choose-and-cut" operation. If you want to color your trees with a commercial coloring dye, apply it in late September or early October. It will easily hold through the holiday season and will not wash off in the rain. Follow label instructions carefully for mixing and applying colorant. Antidessicants (chemicals intended to prevent needles from drying out) are not particularly effective.

Marking Trees to Cut

Whether you wholesale your trees or sell directly to the consumer, you should choose which trees to sell each year. If you have the time and patience, map your entire plantation so you can keep track of what happens with each tree. Flagging the tree tops with bright colored plastic tape is probably the easiest method of



Digging your own tree

marking. One grower counts lengths of tape by 25s up to the total number of trees he wants to sell that year. Then he takes the bundles of 25 into the field, selects and tags the trees, keeping track of how many have and have not been marked at any time.

With a "choose-and-cut" operation, you need a way to know which trees have been tagged and which ones haven't, so customers don't switch tags on you. Your own staff can go into the field with each customer to cut the tree for them, but when the season gets really busy, that labor becomes costly. Double tagging the tree, like double spotting timber trees to be cut, may be another solution. Attach the second tag near the tree trunk in a place less obvious than the top and make sure your salespeople know to look for the second tag. If customers cut their own trees and one has no interior tag, you can surcharge the customer for taking a tree not marked for sale.

Cutting and Preparing the Tree

Trees with small diameter trunks can be cut by a weed-eater machine with a woodcutting blade. Most



Selecting a fresh cut tree

commonly, however, people use small chain saws or bow saws to cut Christmas trees. If you allow customers to use saws themselves, you must have good liability insurance and large, clearly visible signs warning of any possible hazard on your property.

Many growers, and probably most consumers, like to have the tree baled to be carried home. A tree can be baled with twine or plastic netting. Materials and equipment to help you use them are available from several manufacturers (See FOR-34). A possible advantage to plastic netting is that it does not bind the tree at any single point; rather, the whole tree is confined. Once at the destination, the netting can be easily slit with scissors or knife, and the tree will bounce back to its original shape. If this service or any other you provide costs you extra money, pass that charge on to the consumer; most are happy to pay for the convenience.

Another service you may want to consider is a shaking device, to shake out the dead needles which may accumulate naturally near the tree trunk. Be sure to inform your customers that conifers shed needles every year, and you are simply removing old, not current, needles (old needles are brown; current needles are green).

If you plan to sell any number of trees in bulk, whether several thousand to a wholesaler or 150 to the

local scout troop, stacking your trees in groups of 10s, 25s or 50s may save time and energy. Leave yourself plenty of room, and plan your loading or collecting area to be as centrally located as possible. Even if you do not stack trees there, when 20 "choose-and-cut" customers come with their vehicles, selected trees and families, you will quickly fill your open space.

Research has shown that trees stay fresher longer after cutting if they are cut *after* they have gone into winter dormancy. One would expect dormancy to occur by November, but weather affects it to some extent. If the fall is long and warm, cut as late as you can, but if fall brings early frosts and mainly cool weather, you can begin cutting earlier. Try to plan ahead for that kind of flexibility.

Once again, the bottom line is planning ahead. You need to know how you will market, arrange for sales, and make sure you have all necessary materials, equipment, labor and insurance to get the job done when you need it done. After your first harvesting Christmas passes, you can sit back, assess your performance and consider possible changes that need to be made to make the whole process go more smoothly the next year.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, C. Oran Little, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Lexington, and Kentucky State University, Frankfort.

This publication was printed using soybean oil-based ink.

Issued 4-86, 3M; rev. 8-91 -- 3M