

CHRISTMAS TREES IN VIRGINIA

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The Christmas tree industry in Virginia is small by comparison to the States of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Oregon. It is a young industry. The largest plantation is about fifty acres; the average is fifteen acres. The first plantation was begun in 1961 and the Virginia Christmas Tree Growers' Association was founded in 1964 by interested growers with the help of V.P.I.

Prior to the establishment of plantations in Virginia, our Christmas trees were cedars cut in friendly farmers' fields or unsheared white pines. Slowly, the plantation-grown sheared trees from other states made their way into the markets of the metropolitan areas in Northern Virginia and Norfolk and Richmond. Their acceptance was immediate. It soon became clear that if a customer sees a sheared tree, he will choose such as his standard.

There is no way to categorize the average grower. There are doctors, lawyers, retired service people, mechanics and contractors, but no full-time growers.

Cultural practices vary as widely as the growers themselves. Some hand plant, some use planting machines. As many shear with knives as clippers. Spacing varies from five to twelve-foot rows, so mowing equipment ranges from Gravellys to farm tractors, and sprayers range from little pump-up tanks to back-pack mist blowers to tractor-mounted rigs.

The economics of growing our Christmas trees is becoming a complicated issue. When gasoline was 20¢ a gallon, labor was \$1.00 an hour and land was \$100 an acre, trees wholesaled for 50¢ per foot and retailed for \$1.00 per foot. Now, gasoline is 70¢, labor is \$3.00 and the same land is \$1,000 with appropriate taxes. The growers have not been able to triple their prices. We have heard about white pines selling for \$35.00 in Washington last Christmas, but 80% of the market here in Virginia is small towns where people just can't understand such prices.

The eternal question is just how much will the average person pay for a tree before switching to plastic. Happily, trees are in great demand. We grow less than 10% of the trees sold in the State each year and there seems to be an alternative to wholesaling. That is, the choose and cut idea--which is gaining popularity each year. Six years ago, there were only five choose and cut plantations in the State. Last year, there were 14; some offering just trees, some had trees and wreaths, and at least one also had a very successful ornament shop.

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The ideal locations for choose and cut operations would be around Richmond or Washington, but surprisingly enough, we find that some people from cities will make a 200 mile round trip for a tree if the quality is tops. A trip to the country is becoming a back-to-nature experience for cooped-up city dwellers.

We are in a state of change, improving in our cultural method each year, and our marketing methods by trending toward choose and cut, but we are also at a definite cross-road in choosing the species to plant. Scotch pines are our #1 tree--mostly the Spanish Guadarrama. In the past 12 months, all one hears is "I've planted my last Scotch pine." We did a good job of controlling tip moth and needle cast, but there is no way to fight the Eastern and Western gall rust state-wide. Norway Spruce are not well accepted by the wholesale buyers because of poor needle retention. They grow well here, though--and show much promise in the choose and cut market because the tree goes immediately from field to home. Douglas firs don't do well and there are very few suitable locations for the beautiful Fraser firs which do so well in Western North Carolina. Through the process of elimination, that leaves us with white pine. Fortunately, it has gained excellent public acceptance. It grows well because it is a native tree. A man who once worked on my plantation told me many years ago, 'if God had wanted it to grow here, He'd have done planted it.' Well, He did plant the white pine in Virginia and it grows well, shears beautifully and makes a beautiful Christmas Tree.

It is my greatest hope that the Christmas tree industry in Virginia will continue to expand--especially the young people whom we so desperately need. Our business has to be the most interesting and rewarding venture I have ever encountered.