

An Introduction to Growing Christmas Trees in Virginia

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Ed. note: Christmas trees in July? While not seasonal, I wanted to feature this article in time to promote the upcoming Virginia Christmas Tree Growers Association's Annual meeting in Staunton this August. See the Events Calendar for details!

Virginia landowners may want to consider Christmas tree farming as an alternative enterprise for their unused open land. It is estimated that there are between 400 and 500 growers in Virginia. They range in size from choose-and-cut operations on a few acres of land to wholesale operations covering hundreds of acres, with the average farm having around 40 acres in production. Regardless of size, growing Christmas trees successfully takes expertise and an investment of time and capital.

This article provides a brief introduction to Christmas tree production in Virginia. Potential growers should certainly seek more detailed information from their local Virginia Cooperative Extension agents and specialists because proper planning can be the key to a successful plantation.

Advantages of Growing Christmas Trees

Most agricultural and horticultural crops require larger financial investments and more intensive management than timber production. Christmas tree production is a compromise between short-term, intensively managed agricultural crops and long-term timber production.

- Christmas tree rotations are much shorter than timber rotations.
- Christmas trees can be grown economically on small acreages.
- Christmas trees require less groundcover disturbance than many agricultural crops.
- Capital investment for machinery can be low for Christmas tree production.
- Many growers begin production for reasons other than economic returns.



A Christmas tree farm in Grayson County. Photo by: Jennifer Gagnon, Virginia Tech.

Misconceptions About Growing Christmas Trees

- ***Growing Christmas trees is easy.*** As you continue to read through this article, you will understand that growing a quality tree will take investments of time, work, and money.
- ***It will be a good use of my marginal land.*** It is true that trees, especially pines, can adapt and survive in a variety of climate and soil conditions. However, as a Christmas tree grower, you are not just trying to have a tree survive; you need it to thrive.
- ***It is a quick return on investment with a very high rate of return.*** Growing Christmas trees is an investment in capital and time, and it carries the same inherent risks as other types of farming.

Christmas Trees as an Investment

Experienced growers estimate that once the trees are above 3 feet tall, each acre requires about 40 man-hours per year of care. Furthermore, many cultural treatments must be done at certain times of the year. Shearing is often confined to a five-week period during early summer, and mowing is required throughout the growing season. Frequently, growers will plant too many trees and find they must hire outside help in order to keep up with all the cultural practices that need to be done in later years.

There are many costs of producing Christmas trees that must be borne during the early years of the plantation. It is not until some trees are large enough for harvest and sale that a positive cash flow begins.

Production costs can include the following:

- Equipment (mowers, sprayers, shearing equipment, etc.).
- Labor (planting, pest control, shearing, harvesting, etc.).
- Seedlings.
- Chemicals (herbicides, insecticides, fertilizers, etc.).
- Miscellaneous items (signs, flagging, road maintenance, gates, etc.).

Total costs will often depend on the size of the operation.

Finally, there are no guarantees of high prices at the end of the rotation because there is always the risk of valuable trees succumbing to drought, wildfire, insects, diseases, and pests.

What Type of Farm Are You Going to Have?

Christmas tree growers in Virginia have three options when growing and marketing their trees: wholesale, choose and cut, and retail lots.

Selling Christmas trees wholesale refers to selling large numbers of trees at one time to one or a few buyers. Wholesale prices for Fraser fir in 2013 were \$26 for No. 1 and \$20 for a lower-grade No. 2 tree. Choose-and-cut growers sell single trees to individual customers visiting their farms. These farms have trees of all different sizes and up to 10 different species. Alternatively, Christmas tree farmers may choose to market their trees on a separate retail lot. Each of these methods has benefits and drawbacks.

Christmas Tree Production

Site Selection

Once the grower has determined the type of farm they are going to have, the next consideration is site selection. The most suitable planting areas, spacing, appropriate tree species, and logistical constraints should be determined. The importance of proper planning cannot be stressed enough.

Plantation Planning

Proper planning before planting ensures the efficiency of subsequent operations. Planning includes determining the total number of available acres to be planted, plantation layout, and individual tree spacing. The most serious mistake is excessive planting without consideration of the subsequent labor requirements and marketing.

Site Preparation

Once the plans for the location and number of trees are laid out, the site can be prepared for planting. Inadequate site preparation creates future problems that often require extensive hand labor to correct or could even cause plantation failure.

Depending on conditions, site preparation may consist of any or all of these operations:

- Eradicating existing trees and shrubs.
- Removing physical obstacles (stumps, logs, etc.) to permit cultural operations.
- Controlling grasses and other herbaceous vegetation.

Site preparation should be completed the fall before planting; herbicide treatments should be done by late summer to early fall.

Species Selection and Seedling Size

Many species of Christmas trees can be grown in Virginia. Along with species that have traditionally dominated the market — Fraser fir, eastern white pine, Scotch pine, Norway spruce, Colorado blue spruce, Leyland cypress, and Douglas-fir — many new species are being introduced. These exotic species include Concolor fir, Canaan fir, Turkish fir, Carolina sapphire cypress, and Serbian spruce, to name a few. With regard to seedling size, larger seedlings will be marketable sooner; of course, they are also more expensive.

Once you've completed your planning and seedling selection, the real work begins. For a successful venture, you must also consider the following tasks:

- **Planting**
- **Weed Control**
- **Shearing**
- **Fertilization**
- **Pest Control**
- **Coloring**
- **Marketing**

For details on these aspects of growing Christmas trees, see the full-length version of this article: *An Introduction to Growing Christmas Trees in Virginia*, Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication 420-080; https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/420/420-080/420-080_pdf.pdf
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For more information, contact the author, the Virginia Christmas Tree Growers Association (<http://www.virginiachristmastrees.org>), or the Mount Rogers Area Christmas Tree Growers Association, Inc. (www.mtrogersfraserfir.org).

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