

## Christmas Tree Ramblings

**By: Adam Downing, Virginia Cooperative Extension**

If you have a real Christmas tree in your home this year, congratulations! Real trees are an excellent example of a natural and renewable resource. While some folks think it is bad to cut down a tree, the truth of it is that a real tree is renewable. Fake trees are fabricated from a mixture of non-renewable resources such as iron-ore and petroleum.

Real trees grow on Christmas tree farms where they were planted and tended to for an average of 6-12 years. Many folks think nice “Norman Rockwell” type pictures and thoughts regarding Christmas tree farms. Why not? It is, after all, like a piece of Christmas all year around!

Actually, Christmas tree farming is hard work... good for building character.

When I was about 8 years old, my father decided we would plant a few dozen Christmas trees to (help) pay for my brother and I to go to college. We thought highly of the idea until the time came to do it. Although fall is actually the best time for tree planting, I think we planted in the spring of the year. The ground was plenty wet, too wet for any Norman Rockwell paintings.

We did finally manage to get the trees in the ground while slopping around in rubber boots. Where we planted was about half an acre of tall grasses. Normally, control of competing vegetation starts before planting. Whether mechanically by mowing or chemically with basic herbicides, the important thing is to start **before** planting. However, we did not do this. Actually, we did not even use either of these methods after planting but we did control the weeds.

After we planted the trees, our job was to carry wheel-barrel loads of some sort of construction waste. I do not know what it is called, but it comes in full sheets like plywood but it is rather breakable and not very solid. We proceeded to break this up into smaller pieces which were placed around the base of each tree as mulch. It functioned very well to control weeds and conserve moisture but it was certainly more labor intensive than conventional approaches, which is why they are the convention I suppose!

At any rate, a few years after we planted the trees, we moved to an actual farm. Yep, had to start all over with that college fund! With more space to work with, we planted hundreds of trees in three different spots. Although we now had a tractor, we still planted by hand except for dragging a “ripper” through ground to more-or-less mark a line for planting on. This time though, we did have a mechanical advantage for controlling weeds! We mowed before planting and in-between rows after planting. We also utilized a very unique method of controlling the weeds closest to the trees... we called it “stomping.” This entailed circling each tree and stomping everything down to the ground except the tree. This, of-course, is very environmentally friendly, but a rather short-term control needing to be done again when the weeds spring back up.



**Christmas trees growing in Grayson County, VA. Grayson County is one of the top five Christmas tree producers in the nation. Photo by: Jennifer Gagnon, Virginia Tech.**

After a couple years of letting the trees get established, we began to shape the trees by shearing. I was excited about this new phase of culturing as I imagine working with sharp blades and making the trees look like something for Christmas. This enthusiasm was relatively short-lived as I began to work with hedge clippers in the dog days of summer. Experienced Christmas tree growers can shear a tree very quickly with regular shearing knives. As rookies, it took us several minutes a tree and the first few probably resembled big eggs more than Christmas trees.

Fortunately for me, I was able to go to college (having yet to sell a single tree) and escape much of the work for the next few years. Mom and Dad continued to care for the Christmas tree plantations while my younger brother also helped (2 more years before his college escape). Shearing and pest monitoring was Mom's job, Dad helped with planting and mowing. The thing with Christmas tree growing, most of the time there is not a lot to be done, but when the time of year comes for shearing, for instance, there is quite a narrow window to get it done.

Growing Christmas trees is, in large part, a labor of love, and a noble one at that. A Christmas tree might grow for 6-12 years before it is harvested. Over that time, they benefit the environment by cleaning air and water, providing homes for wildlife, and providing scenic beauty.

The benefits of Christmas trees do not have to end the first week after Christmas either! For those who enjoy wildlife, the tree can continue its service. One possibility is to stand the tree upright (lashed to a stake) near a bird feeder as a roost. Another use is to use it to build a brush pile for rabbits and other small mammals. Lastly, if wildlife is not a particular interest or you do not have the space, you can cut it up and enjoy its glow one last time on a cold winter evening in the fireplace.

What ever you do, keep using real Christmas trees and enjoy the fact that they are a farm product and a natural renewable resource with multiple uses year around!

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