

Management essential for Xmas tree farms

Each Christmas season depletes Christmas tree reserves of nearly 30 million pines, spruces, firs, cedars and balsams. This heavy toll for decking the halls could present a considerable rotation or replacement problem if tree farmers weren't prepared. Fortunately, many meet the situation with careful and even creative plans.

Theoretically, replacement fills a one to one ratio. When a tree is cut, a sapling replaces it. According to Donald McNeil, executive director of the National Christmas Tree Growers Association, Milwaukee, a new season may require two to three saplings to replace a harvested tree if weather or other factors damage or kill the new trees. Which species to plant depends upon marketing possibilities, maturation rates and soils; rotation sharpens a human and animal element, as well.

John Sester, state forester of Illinois Division of Forestry, Springfield, and owner of 10 acres of Christmas trees, stressed maturation and public demands. Growing a six foot pine takes five to six years for red pine, seven to eight for scotch, and eight to nine years for white pine, he said. Firs require eight to 10 years; spruces average 10 to 12. McNeil said scotch pine is the most popular tree species with Douglas fir placing second and balsam close behind. Spruces, white and red pine, and cedar also adorn homes.

Saplings are selected by age. The most economical saplings are known as 3-0, the number indicating that they grew in the seed bed for three years with no years in a transplant bed. 3-1 trees sell and have an advantage of one year in a transplant bed although Sester said he considered the extra cost unnecessary.

Tree sources also differ. State supported nurseries in Illinois grow species sold at 12 inches from the root collar to the top of the saplings while private stock is six to eight inches high.

Planting is best done as soon as possible. Saplings must remain

moist and cool and stored along the north side of a building. If planting waits for a longer period, "heeling in" is recommended. This is done by digging a V-shaped trench and positioning the sapling in it, then cover-

ing it with enough soil and water.

For planting, a temperature of 40 to 50 degrees and overcast weather provides the ideal start. March and April are best planting

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Xmas tree farm management

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months in most regions. Watch for sunshine or windiness which can dry roots. Rain soon after planting is another plus.

Sester advised planting no closer than six by six feet, although he prefers eight by six feet to allow for easier mowing, weed control and to prevent shading of lower branches. Any species can grow together, side by side, since only distance regulates their well-being, Sester said. Sapling can thrive beside a stump. However, Sester noted that white pine start with greater difficulty but last once they begin to grow.

Seventy five to 80 percent survival is average for each year. McNeil said 1976 planting suffered and will need replacement since many saplings failed to endure the double clout of summer drought and the harsh winter.

After planting, a one or two

week check for three months protects the tree from encroaching dangers of weeds, insects or animals. Bagworm, field mice, deer and choking weeds may threaten. Checking also benefits the grower since trees protect and flourish upon agricultural wasteland too poor to support corn. Instead, the trees offer beauty, erosion control and encourage wildlife.

After June, mowing becomes necessary to combat weeds that would grow over saplings and blur distinct tree rows. But the saplings themselves don't need special care until their third or fourth year when "shearing" begins. Shearing, the careful shaping of trees by cutting, usually happens in June, Sester said. Its purpose is to provide a bushier, more conical and aesthetic looking tree for the buyer.

There are alternatives in plant-

ing. The soil can support planting cycles without damage, Sester explained, so no special crops are needed for rotation. Yet, the grower can use the fields to support other crops while waiting six or more years for the first tree harvest. Barley, oats, soybeans, and sorghum, as "nurse crops," cut weed growth and yield grains for livestock. By planting one half or a normal seedling of grains and keeping them for several years, the grower gets a yield until trees grow too tall and interfere. At this time, energies are best directed toward the trees.

"In one interesting case a man did plant Christmas trees and planted sorghum between the rows," Sester recalled. "He harvested this for his livestock until the trees got too big. All he did was get something off it for three to four years." □

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