

Real trees make for lasting memories

By Barbara A. Schmitz

For some, it's a full-time business. For others, it's a way to make a little cash. No matter their size — selling as little as a few hundred Christmas trees in a season to thousands — for Wisconsin's Christmas tree growers, it's all about providing a state-based, ecologically sound product to decorate families' living rooms each December.

But for many Wisconsin residents, it's more than just that. Buying a live Christmas tree is a tradition, filled with decades of memories of picking just the right one. Yes, they may be doing the ecologically right thing, but it's the process — finding the right tree, and then getting everyone to agree on it — that makes it an annual event.

Greg Hann, president and promotions director of the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association, <https://www.christmastrees-wi.org/>, and owner of Hann's Christmas Trees in Oregon, said the association was created years ago to provide a means of communication between growers, as well as to educate them about things impacting the industry. The association boasts about 115 members, or slightly more than half of the licensed growers in the state, he said, adding that Wisconsin is fifth in the nation for Christmas tree production.

Hann bought his tree farm from his father in 2000 and sells about 5,000 trees a year. "My father bought 7 acres in 1968, the year before I was born, with the dream of earning enough money to buy a new pickup truck," he said. "He planted 2,000 trees on 2 acres, and it just grew from there."

Climate change has impacted trees' survival rates, particularly when areas get the huge rains that have become commonplace, he said.

"Remember when we'd get a nice gentle rain all day?" he asked. "Now we get 5-8 inches of rain at once and the fields can't absorb it; there's standing water."

The change in precipitation has meant that Christmas tree farmers



Randy Cooper, right, helps to bale up a customer's Christmas tree.

must be more selective in where they plant specific types of trees. "There are certain trees that don't like getting their feet wet," he said, "so you need to plant trees that will do well in standing water in those areas."

Twenty years ago, the most popular trees were the medium needle Scotch and white pines, and Wisconsin's balsam was "up and coming," Hann said. But Fraser firs, native to the Appalachian Mountains of the southeastern United States, are now the top seller in Wisconsin. White firs, with a medium but softer needle, are also becoming more popular, as well as Canaan firs, which have many of the characteristics of a balsam but with better needle retention of the Fraser fir. Hann said while some people will opt for artificial trees, in six or seven years they generally come back to live trees. "They miss that natural fragrance, that smell," he said.

WWOA members Karen and Randy Cooper have been growing Christmas trees since 1994 and selling them since 2002 on their family farm in New Berlin. While much of the farm is rented out to a local farmer, they set aside about 15 acres for Christmas trees for their choose-and-cut operation and



Karen and Randy Cooper

sell in the hundreds each year, offering shaking and baling to ensure the trees can be easily transported without losing too many needles.

Too many people think you plant trees and within a few years they will be large enough to cut, Karen said. "But it took us 8 years to get at least 6-foot trees to offer to people," she said. To keep the supply coming down the line, they generally plant seedlings every year. But the weather for the last two springs has made that difficult.

"The last two springs were incredibly wet," Karen said. "We lost pretty much everything that Randy planted."

In fact, Randy said he planned to machine plant 1,500 scotch pine in an area where they had previously harvested trees, but the area was so wet that he was never able to plant there. Thankfully, most of the trees that he was able to hand plant survived the wet conditions.

"We can't grow our trees fast enough," said Randy, who is also WWOA president. "We're right outside Milwaukee so the market is at our doorstep, particularly since many farms around us have closed down."

Their most popular trees are scotch pine, balsam and Canaan fir. They tried growing Fraser fir, but with the heavy clay soil, they gave up. "They would get to be about 4 or 5 feet and just die," Randy said. "They just don't like the wet feet."

Karen said they started selling Christmas trees because they like being outdoors and they like the extra money the business brings in. But she has been pleasantly surprised by how much satisfaction they get watching the same people come back year after year, and seeing the kids grow up and people coming back with their grandchildren.

"I like the planting and the field work; that's what I always thought I'd enjoy the most. But really, it's been the people. Selling is such a fun part of the year..."

Plus, Randy likes educating people about forestry. "We get lots of questions like how long does it take for a tree to grow," Randy said. "We also end up promoting WWOA, too."

For anyone interested in selling Christmas trees, the Coopers recommend joining the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association, even before you plant your first tree. "Much like WWOA with conferences, the association gives you the opportunity to pick the brain of all kinds of people and get answers to questions you may have."

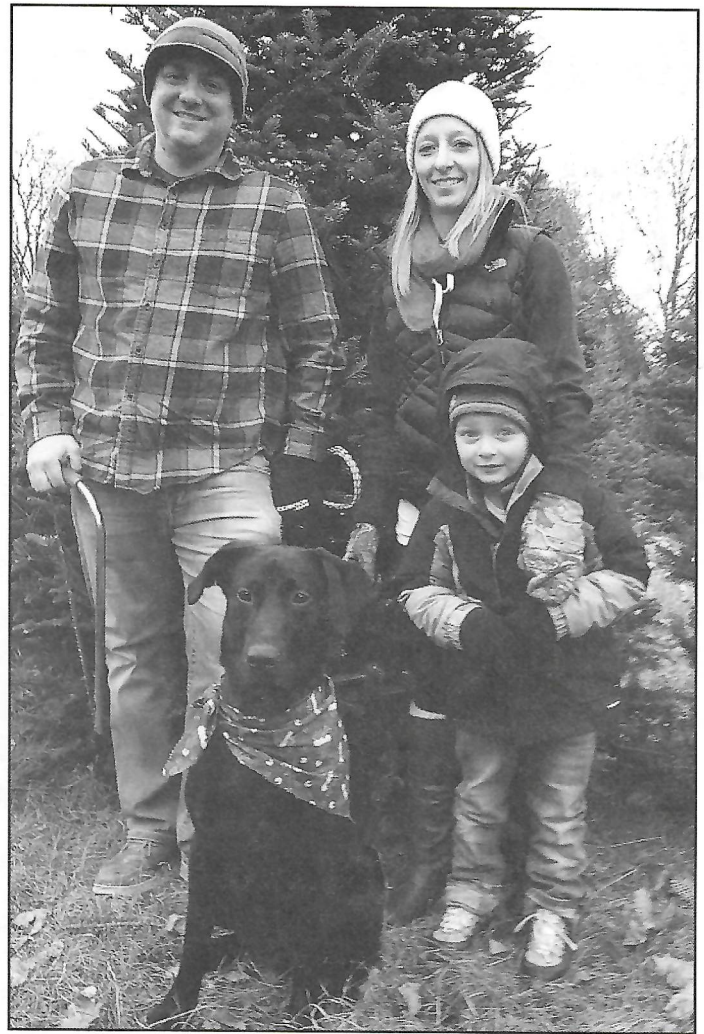
While they don't advertise their business except for signs at the end of the road and a listing on the tree producers' website, they are on Google and Facebook. "And those are free," Karen said. "We've found that they really draw people in. It's also a well-known fact among Christmas tree growers that Santa leaves his best presents under a real tree."

The Coopers admitted that growing Christmas trees is more work than they originally thought, especially when they were both working full time and doing the work on the tree farm in their spare time. But it doesn't look like they plan on getting out of the business anytime soon.

"It's just the two of us. Knowing that it will take 8 to 12 years before a tree will grow into a product we can sell, every year we plant we know we're going to be 10 years older when those trees are finally cut," Karen said. "But Randy is already talking about his spring order for trees... We're in this for a while yet."

It's a similar story for Buzz and Marcia Vahradian. They started in the Christmas tree business near their Mount Morris home in Waushara County in 1988, planting 1,000 trees. "1988 was a severe drought year, and 100% of our trees died," Buzz recalled. "So in 1989, we planted 3,000 trees."

It's not the only time weather played a factor in their tree business. A drought in 2012 killed hundreds of their trees, many 8-10 feet Fraser firs that had been sheared for 10-12



Above: More families are expected at V's Trees as people search for safe activities to do during the pandemic. **Left:** The Vahradian's irrigation system, installed after a 2012 drought.

years, said Buzz, Central Sands Chapter co-chair. "We had a huge financial loss that year," he said. "As a result of that catastrophic drought, we put in an irrigation system that cost a lot of money. But since then, we've been bulletproof. If there is a dry spell, we just irrigate." Of course that's another advantage to being smaller, Marcia said.

Their Christmas tree farm is also small and choose-and-cut by design.

"Customers come and cut the tree themselves so we don't have to worry about cutting a product that we hope to sell at a later date, knowing that product is worthless on Dec. 26," Buzz said. "Plus, you have no cost in cutting the trees and hauling them somewhere to resell them."

They offer baling services and saws for their customers to use. "Usually what happens is a family pulls into the driveway and the mom gets the kids in their snowpants while the dad comes and asks about the different species of trees," Buzz said. "I hand them a saw and the family takes a hike through the trees, maybe enjoying a snowball fight or making snowmen, or getting pulled on a sled. People are really paying for the experience, not just the tree."

Buzz said they also sell honey since they have a sideline bee keeping operation. For many, "it's also become part of their tradition."

Marcia is anticipating this year will be busier than normal with COVID-19, as people look for things they can do safely. "We generally don't have large groups of people here at the same time," she said. "The only time you have to be concerned about social distancing is when you're baling the tree."

Many of their customers return yearly. "We know couples before they get married, and then a year or two later, they're having kids. Then their kids are teenagers or going to college," Buzz said. "It is amazing to see how much of a family your customers become when you're doing something like this for so long."

For others considering starting a Christmas tree farm, Buzz said the most important thing is to have good soil so you don't need to spend money on an irrigation system. Good soil will ensure better growth, survivability and health and vigor of your trees.

Secondly, be realistic about the labor needed. "It is a lot more labor than people think, and the most expensive cost is shearing," he said. When they were younger, they did all the shearing. But as the years went by, they realized their shoulders couldn't tolerate it as much so now they hire help.

Marcia said you have to like the work, if you are going to sell Christmas trees.

"And we do love it," Buzz said. "I love the growing of the trees, and Marcia loves the selling. The biggest bonus is the family of customers who have grown up over the course of the 32 years we've been in business."



Recognition and Thanks

New Members

Aug. 1, 2020 - Oct. 31, 2020

Regular Members (19)

Eric Baillargeon, Milltown
Woods – Polk Co.
Troy Berg, Eau Claire
Woods – Clark Co.
Mark Bohrnstedt, Oshkosh
Woods – Outagamie
Jeffrey Bublitz, Pewaukee
Woods – Adams Co.
Scott Corbin – Spooner
Woods – Washburn
Duan Damron, Janesville
Woods – Lafayette Co.
Ron Gumz, Hubertus
Woods – Wood Co.
Jennifer Hoskins, Bartlett, IL
Woods – Price Co.
Jim & Jackie Kolinski, Plover
Woods – Adams
Lawrence Krause, Pewaukee
Woods – Langlade Co.
Gene McLain, Grantsburg
Woods – Burnett Co.
Ronnah Metz – La Crosse
Woods – Crawford Co.
Rick Neville, Eden Prairie, MN
Woods – Sawyer
Dennis Peterson, Waupaca
Woods – Marathon Co.
Mike Polelle, Madison
Woods – Crawford
Ed Romberg, Marion
Woods – Shawano Co.
Chris Soutter, St. Paul, MN
Woods – Burnett Co.
Larry Stutzriem, Marshfield
Woods – Marathon Co.

Jeff Wittrock, Delafield
Woods – Waupaca & Waushara Co.

Associate Members (4)

Allan Braun, Platteville
Stephen Eager, Evansville
Emily Janicek Grum, Elm Grove
Sue McKenzie, Stevens Point

Members Gifting Memberships (5)

Nancy Bozek, Stevens Point
Roxanne Erickson, Medford
Jack Kucksdorf, Random Lake
Dan Peterson, Wisconsin Rapids
David Wilson, Austin, TX

Awards (3)

- Dan Peterson, Wisconsin Rapids – WWOA Wooden Bookmark
- Francis Van Lieshout, Little Chute – WWOA Wooden Bookmark
- David Wilson, Austin, TX – WWOA Wooden Bookmark

Membership Recruiting Awards

- 2 new members - WWOA Wooden Bookmark
- 5 new members - WWOA Cap
- 10 new members - WWOA 18" x 18" Sign
- 25 new members - Free 1 Year WWOA Membership



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