

# Growing Christmas Trees . . .



## Is It Right for You?

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**Y**ou have 10 spare acres and are trying to figure out the best way to put the land to productive use. Should you be thinking of becoming a Christmas tree grower? What should you consider before starting a new plantation and how best to get started?

First, you need to consider how you are going to market your trees once they are ready, four to eight years down the road. You have two basic options: either set up your operation as a “Choose and Cut” where you allow customers to come onto your farm, pick out, and cut down their tree; or, wholesale your trees to a broker in large lots. The method of sales will dictate how you set up your operation and which tree species are best for you.

If you decide on a “Choose and Cut” operation, then you need to consider the distance from your farm to the nearest metropolitan area. Most operations are located relatively close to large cities. The farther out you are, the less likely customers will drive to get their tree. Buyers of real trees tend to be owners of homes with children still present, so the closer you are to housing developments with moderate-to-high priced houses, the better.

Coming to your farm to select a tree is a family event. You are not just selling trees, but rather the total experience of visiting a farm as a family outing. You will need adequate all-weather

roads and parking, and a pleasant sales area where you can shake, bale, and load the trees after purchase. This method also requires more labor per tree, with the peak sales on weekends from Thanksgiving through the first two weeks of December. During these three weeks, your life will be dictated by tree sales.

“Choose and Cut” will yield the highest price per tree, but also has higher labor and sales costs associated with it. It gives you the greatest flexibility in choice of tree species. Since the trees are cut fresh and placed in water relatively quickly, Leyland and Arizona cypresses along with Virginia and white pines work well. This option also affords you the opportunity to sell other items such as wreaths, sprays, stands, B&B (balled and burlapped) trees [live trees that can be replanted], refreshments, ornaments, etc. It is also a good method for educating children and the public by hosting school and church tours. Many operators schedule a visit from Santa Claus, or rent reindeer or other petting zoo animals. Remember, it’s the experience you are selling as much as the trees.

If you choose to wholesale your trees, December becomes a much easier month. In fact, most trees will be cut before Thanksgiving and off your farm before December arrives. However, only trees that have excellent needle-holding capacity

and stay fresh for weeks can be used, which eliminates the cypresses. Even Virginia pines – which have a shelf life out of water of a couple of weeks – should be sold in split-delivery orders at local markets only. Instead of all-weather roads and a large parking lot, you will need to establish an all-weather staging area where your cut trees can be baled and loaded onto trucks.

Whichever method of sales you choose, you will need to produce high quality trees. In the production of Christmas trees, it is possible to do 90 percent of the work necessary to produce a good tree, but still not have much of a product. Most retail customers will pay \$30 to \$40 for a good tree (half as much for wholesale), but will not pay \$20 for a defective tree (improperly sheared, weak base due to poor weed control, crooked stem from being blown over or no insect control, bad color from not being sprayed, improper handle length, etc.). You will need to devote four to eight years to produce each tree. Although most field procedures do not require immediate attention, they still must be accomplished within a set time period. For example, white pines need to be sheared between the first of July and the middle of August. Not shearing in this time period will result in improper bud set and much corrective work on the tops of the trees. If a shearing is missed, there will be a large gap between whorls, rendering most trees worthless. In short, you need to know what you are doing and be dedicated to getting it done.

So how should you get started? First, begin at least one year before you plant your first tree. You need to visit other farms, join the Southern Christmas Tree Association ([www.southernchristmastrees.org](http://www.southernchristmastrees.org)), and pick up technical information from the Alabama Cooperative Extension System on how to grow Christmas trees. Dr. Ken Tilt ([ktilt@acesag.auburn.edu](mailto:ktilt@acesag.auburn.edu)) is the state specialist at Auburn University. Every grower I know would be willing to have you come out to their farm, show you around, and answer any questions you may have. They would probably be willing to demonstrate cultural practices such as planting, weed control, basal pruning, shearing, and insect control, as well as let you see their sales area. Visiting an existing farm is the best investment of time you can make before starting up your operation. By joining the Southern Christmas Tree Association, you will have the opportunity to meet with other growers and ask questions of the experts across the South at one of their annual meetings. Starting the year prior will also allow you to get your soil tested, correct any deficiencies, and lay out and sub-soil (if needed) your first field.

You also need to consider the availability of good labor and your current age. As stated above, it will take four to eight years just to produce your first crop of trees. Most of the work is man-

ual field labor that requires a bit of training and practice before a worker becomes proficient. I've often commented that when training a worker to shear trees, the first week they will probably harm more trees than they will help. Then for the next few weeks, they will do a satisfactory job – but are very slow. It's into the second month before they get good and get fast. If you do not have regular, consistent workers, you will end up doing what most Christmas tree growers do . . . you'll do the work yourself. Once you open your gates, it may take another several years to establish your clientele and build your business to its capacity. Then, when you decide to quit, it may take several more years to clear out all trees after you stop planting. That's

four years to first harvest, five or more years to establish the business, and another six years after you stop planting to clear trees – or a minimum of 15 years. If you are considering this as a retirement job and are already 60 years old, are you going to be able to do the physical field labor when you are 75?

Finally, we are in Alabama. Summers are hot and humid. When the temperature is over 90 degrees with heat indices in the 100s, physical field labor such as shearing is not possible. You may estimate that you can get the majority of your shearing done on weekends if you work six hours per day, but realistically you only have from 7:00 a.m. until around 10:30 a.m.

before you get too hot. How many trees can you shear in that time frame, and how many days per week can you do it? That will determine the maximum number of trees you should have. Probably, well over 90 percent of all landowners who have planted seedlings have never seen a commercial harvest – the numbers look good on paper, but the heat of July is the reality.

If you do decide to press ahead and start planting trees, go slowly. Grow your operation as your trees grow. At 6-by-7 foot spacing, you can plant close to 1,000 trees per acre. If you do a good job, you may be able to harvest 70 percent of each planting, or approximately 700 trees per acre. At a wholesale value of \$15 per tree (over \$30 per tree for Choose and Cut), you may harvest over \$10,000 worth of trees per acre on a six- to seven-year rotation. Few crops can generate this income – Christmas trees can, if they are high quality trees. You will also have the pleasure of being a part of many families' Christmas celebrations. After 20 years, you'll get to see the second generation of a family coming out to experience your farm. It can be very rewarding, but be committed for the long run. Start a year early and visit with as many growers as you can. 🌲

