

CHRISTMAS TREE, O CHRISTMAS TREE

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree!
How lovely art thou branches!
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree!
How lovely art thou branches!
Your boughs are green in summer's glow
And do not fade in winter's snow
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree!
How lovely art thou branches!

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree!
Thou tree most fair and lovely!
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree!
Thou tree most fair and lovely!
The sight of thee at Christmastide
Spreads hope and gladness far and wide
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree
Thou tree most fair and lovely!

Ah, the wonders and magic of Christmas, and of Christmas trees. Many of our fondest memories and strongest traditions are bound to the real Christmas tree: going with the family to cut one on the farm, or to pick one at the lot; lighting and decorating those “lovely branches”; the wonderful smell of a fresh tree permeating the house. A REAL TREE in the house for a special occasion.

But does the mass production of real trees these days “spread hope and gladness far and wide?” Has your tree been especially “fair and lovely” lately? There is growing concern about the environmental impacts of Christmas tree production, and the poor quality of many mass-produced trees. Our farm is a part of a small but growing movement to produce trees more sustainably, market them fresh, and help folks understand and feel good about their tree again.

My parents Pat and Paul Johnson settled our family on our 100-acre Decorah, Iowa farm in 1974. She was a social worker and became a social work professor (and farmer). He was a forester and became a full-time dairy and Christmas tree farmer, and later became involved in natural resource policy at the state and national level. They have always been community leaders.

When others (sometimes skeptical friends or relatives) asked my parents what they grew on the farm, the first answer was always “kids”! My

brother and sister and I grew up gardening, splitting firewood, milking cows, and of course working with Christmas trees. We’re all married with kids now, but my wife Emily and I and our daughters (Helen 6, Leila 2) continue to partner with my parents on the Christmas trees.

The growing of the trees involves three periods of hard work each year. We plant seedlings by hand with a planting bar in April, wherever trees were cut the previous year. Shearing (shaping) with long knives is done – also by hand – in the hot weeks of June. Delivery and cut-your-own activities occur in late November and December. Maintenance and enhancement activities, such as culling diseased trees, controlling unwanted vegetation, or managing shade trees and habitat, are interspersed throughout the year.

What do we do differently from most farms? First of all we are still a small family farm. Just as in all of agriculture, the trend in Christmas tree production has been toward large farms. Typical mid-sized commercial farms produce around 10,000 trees, larger farms may produce 50,000 trees or more each year. We have averaged 500 trees per year, with a high of just under 1,000.

Larger farms and long shipping distances are not only energy intensive but often result in dry trees delivered to the city lot. Many trees are cut weeks ahead of delivery, and a majority of the pines are even spray-painted green before harvest. A dry, needle-dropping tree that may even pose a fire hazard doesn’t generally inspire one to sing out “O Christmas Tree!”

The best way to get a fresh tree, of course, is to cut your own, and we do operate a small choose ‘n cut operation. But by staying small and delivering locally and regionally, we can also deliver very fresh trees to stores. We never paint our trees, and always cut within a week (usually 1-4 days) of delivery. Maintained in water, our trees should stay fresh and green throughout the holiday season. Fresh trees don’t just hold their needles well and resist flame, they also smell great too!

Chemical use is another obvious area of concern. Like the rest of agriculture, intensity of chemical use has increased with scale of production. Herbicides are broadcast over most plantations

and/or 'banded' in the tree rows, often many times during the year. Many other pesticides (mainly insecticides and fungicides) are also used regularly throughout most tree farms. Sometimes the trees are even fertilized with synthetic nitrogen to improve growth or color.

We have never used any insecticides, fungicides or fertilizers on or among the Christmas trees. We plant multiple species in all areas to minimize the potential for disease or pest outbreaks. The only herbicides we have used are very limited and targeted applications on invasive woody plants, and we're getting away from even that. We do some limited mowing, and a fair amount of machete work to control the ash and boxelder, grape and sumac.

The thick growth of grasses and other plants can certainly be a challenge. The competition often causes us to lose a portion of the young seedlings we plant, which is a significant expense. It takes us longer to grow a market-sized tree than conventional farms. Sometimes the thick growth can harbor insect pests or tree diseases. And a widespread plant called wild parsnip can cause blisters – during June shearing season – that are larger and more painful than poison ivy.

But those very same 'weeds' and grasses also serve many beneficial functions. They protect the soil from erosion, and improve the soil quality and soil biology. They harbor "beneficial" insects which prey on some of the "pest" insects. They certainly encourage a great deal of small mammal and bird life among the trees, which in turn bring predators such as the fox, coyote, owl, hawk, and eagle. June shearing is hard work, but the reward is a loud chorus of mourning doves, bobolinks, chipping sparrows, and the viewing of dozens of nests with eggs or chicks tucked inside the trees.

What does our future hold? Hopefully, consumer awareness and market-based initiatives such as certification programs will increase demand for fresh, sustainably grown trees, produced by small farmers in the local or regional area. Trees sold under the USDA organic rules would certainly come from chemical-free farms, but those rules do not effectively address issues of scale, shipping distance, tree freshness, or biodiversity (we like to call it wildness) on farms.

We have developed the framework for an independent certification program that would take into account all of these issues. We call it FReSH, for **F**resh trees, **R**egionally marketed, **S**ustainably grown, resulting in **H**ealthy families, farms, communities, and ecosystems. The Community Forestry Resource Center in the Twin Cities is one of a number of organizations that could run such a program, and we have discussed the idea with them. The Land Stewardship Project is another.

Certification program or no, we are very happy to be able to offer our fresh, sustainably grown trees to customers of co-ops and health food stores from Cedar Falls, Iowa, to the Twin Cities, MN. Hopefully, environmentally-aware and conservation-minded consumers will increasingly realize that real Christmas trees can still be a good thing to buy, and a "fair and lovely" and aromatic thing to put in their home. And hopefully our farm will remain a good place to raise a new crop of trees, and kids!

Andrew Johnson
www.oneotaslopes.org
emilyandy@oneotaslopes.org