

ILLINOIS CHRISTMAS TREE ASSOCIATION GENERAL MEETING

Saturday January 28, 2023

Treasurer's Report: The financial report for 2022 was read. The report will be filed with the minutes.

Minutes for the corporate meeting in January of 2022 were read. Harold Tanner moved to accept. Harold Tanner seconded. Motion carried.

Old Business.

ICTA now contributes \$2,000 for 2 scholarships to the S.I.U. forestry program.

Harold Tanner moved to continue to pay for ½ the registration for the Winter Meeting. Bill Holesinger 2nd. Motion carried.

Susan Sullivan is the new web master for ICTA.

Summer Meeting is scheduled for Dave Hoover's Ol' Dairy Barn Christmas Tree Farm. The date will be announced.

Wendy Richardson had sent the Illinois NCTA director.

Jim Piechowski has asked to step down from the board of directors. The appointment of a new director was tabled until the Illinois meeting at the MACT.

Great Lakes Christmas Tree Journal cost will increase to \$5.75 per issue. Extra issues received from MCTA will be sent with the new growers' manuals.

There was no new business

Rod Stahl moved to adjourn the meeting. Imogene Tanner seconded. Meeting adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted by Emily Grady 1/29/23

INDIANA-ILLINOIS JOINT WINTER MEETING JANUARY, 2023

TOM DULL, DULL'S TREE FARM, Thorntown, Indiana—GROWING QUALITY CHRISTMAS TREES:

Quality? Maybe it comes down to the ones that go home with the customer. Not all trees should be alike; all trees shouldn't be all the same species; there should be variation in tree conformation within the species.

Soil pH, proper drainage, available soil nutrients and micronutrients all have to be taken into consideration.

With the market preference to firs, what species of fir will grow in your soil conditions? If you have to import pre-cut firs, where will you find a supplier? Get on their list of customers and stay loyal to that supplier. You may need more than one supplier.

Do your homework, know how to handle the species you plant—at least have an idea where the “ideal” works with “what you got.”

Seedlings: Root prune the seedlings. Experiment until your method works. If you use root dip—especially the “super-slurper” (water holding “gel”) do not get it on the foliage. Fertilize if you choose to do so. The green part goes up. (Yes, not a joke if you have help from inexperienced workers). You need some weed control around the bases of the smallest trees. Some growers use mulch. Some grower use chemical controls. Some use both. Leaving weeds to grow around the trees often invites fungus diseases, insect pests, and sometimes rodents. You also have to be able to find the trees when you mow, and you will have to mow.

Interplant for at least 2 years to keep the planting block full. After about 3 years start shaping trees. Fertilize for growth, bud set (important), color (also important), quality foliage. Again, use soil tests.

Shearing: Shape, density, taper. Does all shearing need to be alike? Should some trees need to be sheared at all? [Think about this carefully when dealing some of the firs, specifically Canaan fir.—One speaker call not pruning naturally dense firs “extreme pruning”.] Firs can be pruned any time after the growth hardens to the start of bud break. “Prune them very early or very late.” On a fir leave 18” to 20” of leader (yes, inches). The leader is the most important part of the pruning process. You can train a leader, if necessary. Shear with clippers, knife, Beneke. Use a SaJe (?) if you must. Never go the field without your hand pruners at your side. As you prune, keep track of the health of your trees. You could end up cutting an entire block of trees without selling any. Bare prune the sides of the tree. If the tree looks like a cushion, it's too dense. At 3-4 years you'll establish the “skeleton” of your tree. On a fir, if the top seems to be a bit long, but has perfect bud set, you may be wise to leave that leader alone. On pines, think about how tall you want that tree to be a sale, and how dense you want the tree to appear. The tree needs to have a place to hang the ornaments. Long leaders on a younger tree can allow you to raise a taller tree (9', 10', or taller) at sale. When the tree is about 8', you can shorten the leader to let the tee fill in at the sides.

If you fertilize, the nitrogen goes on in the spring, just before bud break. [That seems to what was actually said.]

Basal prune. Any time from seedlings to plant until time of sale. Whenever you have the chance, or it appears you need to do it.

Tom Dull also explained the “knowing and getting’ disease” of Christmas tree growers. The malady symptoms are knowing what you need to do and the problems of getting’ it done.

Rotation: Allow fallowing, if you have space to do that. Avoid following pines with any other kind of pine. Plant fir or spruce.

If you have drainage problems, tiling can help solve the “wet feet” problem. The tiling can help water move where it of use to the plants. The soil also needs to “breathe.” It is necessary to have soil aerated from the top, however that can be done/hoped for.

Discussion: Concolor firs can have a “sport” leader overtop the natural leader. Growers agreed the location of the over-topping on the tree. The farther down the “sport” starts, the more likely it is to be clipped away.

KATHY & ROD STAHL—CINNAMON TREE FARM, Brimfield, Illinois

Began by buying a very small, established Christmas tree farm. Thanks to a big family—9 children—and the purchase of additional ground, they have a growing business.

When they bought the established farm, Stahls needed to interplant more established, potted trees to push the “plant to harvest” period. Thanks to use of potted trees, they have a wider window of planting than with bare root seedlings. Now they plant 1 qt peat pot trees purchased by the tray. Potted trees allow faster root recovery and therefore recovery to “established” growth. Stahl transports himself. Commercially transported trees may not be in trays. The pots may be deteriorated—especially on the bottoms of the pile—at destination.

Potted trees are easier to interplant in a very limited space. The new trees are also watered if there is infrequent rain. The younger Stahls do the watering. The trees are also mulched to keep the soil cooler, looser and easier to water. About 2 ½ gallons of mulch for each newly planted tree. Weed control practiced with chemicals. Stahl’s turnaround time is reduced on his small acreage. He uses glyphosate (Roundup Powermax, Princep, and encompass as a tank mix). He sprays, usually twice per season. Stahl’s attempts to control broadleaf weeds resulted in damage to the new growth on his trees. One year later, the new growth was normal, losing a full year before sale. Using shields around spray nozzles can herbicide damage to trees.

Fertilizing: newly planted, potted trees are not fertilized. Early spring N is applied prior to bud break. @ granular options: Ammonium sulfate 21-0-0-26S. 21% nitrogen and 26% sulfur per acre. The sulfur lowers pH. The granular is spread at the drip line. For straight nitrogen Stahl uses Urea (46-0-0).

Pruning style: open because the leader are allowed to “stretch.” Tighter, more compact trees are produced by keeping leader shorter. The ideal tree is the one the satisfied customer takes home. If a grower has the space and the time, the trees can be denser.

Marketing strategies: Using management and marketing techniques to enhance the experience. Stahl tags trees individually. This allows him to control which tree is sold from the very small space. Stahl will also grade the trees as he is tagging them for sale. Some of his trees

are very good, but sold at budget prices. Some will be cut for greens. Base pruning some of the trees provides greens as well.

Stahl pays attention to his kids. "Their ideas sell." Painted trees can also sell a tree that's off color. Stahl also flocks trees. Fewer than 10% of the trees are sold flocked. Wreaths are flocked as well and sold at premium prices. The flocking is has fire suppressants in it. Flocked trees cannot be baled. They are sold in a large-diameter plastic sleeve which adds to the premium price.

IN SUMMARY: The small farm is land locked, has drainage issues. There is lots of manual labor available at the moment. It is not necessarily efficient. There is a supply shortage of precuts and greens.

GROWTH: Stahl bought 40 acres of former nursery ground that already had graven lanes and some of the nursery stock still onsite. There will be a different style of production on this acreage. Stahl is addressing the drainage, testing the soil, adjusting the pH with elemental sulfur, planning the field layout. He is planning mowing, weed control, and watering strategies. Planting will probably be mechanical.

Stahl stressed keeping careful diagram records of the locations of the tiles to add to or even remove the tile in the future. If you are looking to purchase land make sure you know if it is tiled and where the tile drains. You need to be in compliance with county, state, and national regulations as to outflow of the tiling effluent. Find out first!

Use elemental sulfur to adjust the pH. This kind of sulfur can be incorporated on unplanted ground.

The first planting was the spring of 2022. Over 4,000 trees were planted by hand on the roto-tilled ground. Most of the trees were bare root. The quart peat pot trees allowed more stable planted trees. A square template frame is use for mulching trees. The square is about 18" X 18". Trees planted on 6' centers, with the careful mulching allows the 4' mower to cut both ways. Stahl does still water on his larger, new plot.

Stahl feels the choose & cut market is "where it is." Some people want to choose from a lot of trees that look alike. Others want individual trees and a "shopping experience."

Saturday, January 28, 2023

Dr. Daniel Cassens (Professor Emeritus of Forestry, Purdue Univ.)

GROWING FIR CHRISTMAS TREES IN INDIANA

Know your soil type! Know your drainage patterns! Indiana, at least has soil maps. Illinois probably does as well.

Recommended in Indiana: plant in late march. Root prune the bare root seedlings. Avoid letting the roots get dry. However, letting the roots of the seedlings stand in water too long will also damage them or will kill the trees.

Use soil sampling. Each species has specific requirements so sample the soil with that in mind. That species will be in that area of soil for 6 or more years. You need to know pH, NPK, calcium, and magnesium. Spectrum Analysis, Inc. (Washington Courthouse[???], Ohio)

provides excellent, independent, testing services for both soil and foliar tests.

Coning in firs, and other species as well, can be a problem. Trees need to be de-coned in the early spring. The younger the cone on the tree, the easier it is to de-cone.

Pruning/shearing. If you use a shearing service, you will likely need to “put in the tops” yourself. The top 18 inches to 3 feet of a tree sells the tree. One of the services charges \$0.50 per foot per tree. A tree needs to appear to have uniform foliage density all the way to the top. Having an evenly spaced bud/branch count for the top whorl may require bud removal or pruning out a dense area on that top whorl to even the spacing all the way around. “Prevent witch’s brooms.”

Weed management: BEFORE BUD BREAK, you can apply Roundup Original for weed control. Dr. Cassens applies the roundup “just as the daffodils bloom.” The next weed control happens in July.

Insect control: Bag worms—“Pinch & pitch.” Spider mites, found by tapping the branch over a sheet of white paper. The red spider mites are the ones you do not want. There are also predaceous spider mites.¹

Associations: Indiana Christmas Tree Growers Association, Illinois Christmas Tree Association, NCTA, MACT Michigan Christmas Tree Association. The Michigan association publishes Great Lakes Christmas Tree Journal.

Dr. Cassens brought 3 samples of fir trees. He had audience members raise hands as to which species each was. 1. Fraser; 2. Canaan, 3. Balsam. The growers were able to identify them.

He held up samples of firs and he and Mrs. Cassens discusses the merits and drawbacks of each species in Tippecanoe County, Indiana. Some of the trees are so slow growing that they are not cost effective in this area. They may grow more quickly in their native areas. Cassens recommended soil testing and careful site selection. Some the growers recommended some of the firs for greens.

In the “it can’t hurt” department a grower could choose to pick out the most robust seedlings to plant separately.

[Note on Korean fir, prune the tops in the fall.] [Note on Turkish fir: a grower pots them for 2-3 years, then plants.

The conference broke into round table discussions.

6 discussion groups traded information and advice. New growers and mentoring; fertilizing and planting; wreaths and gift shop; weeds, irrigation and wildlife control; hiring and employees;

Announcements: Rob Richardson presented Wendy Richardson’s Trees for Troops report. Kathy Woliung, MACT Executive Director, announced the 2023 Summer Meeting at Meert’s Tree Farm, Festus, Missouri. New growers for Indiana and Illinois introduced themselves.

National Director’s Report, Lance Sambol for Indiana. NCTA is the voice of the Christmas Tree industry in the United States. When more growers join together they have the strength of all other growers behind them.

Marsha Gray, Executive Director of the Real Christmas Tree Board. It was the CTPB. It is NOT part of NCTA or of any state or regional organization. It was established by federal law assessing \$0.15 per tree over 500 trees sold to promote and to fund research on real Christmas trees. Growers who sell fewer than 500 trees can contribute if they choose. For 2022 the board chose a single PR firm who used a changed approach to selling real trees. Heavy use of social media and paid search engine marketing paid off. Increasing the percentage of U.S. homes with real trees at Christmas will take time. Funding for research will let growers sell better trees. Videos from real, real tree families were used for the promotions. 2.3 billion impressions. With that many impressions [viewings??], more of the viewers will buy real trees. Keeping real trees in front of the public over a larger part of the year helps sell real trees. Keeping real trees in front of the citizens of major population centers is one of the major targets. The board worked up talking points on inflation. Yes, trees cost more, but not out of line with the base rate of inflation.

New this year there will be an online reporting system. USDA demands anonymity and privacy in any electronic reporting system. Since the formation of the board everything has been all on paper. As our industry changes, we need to change with the new demographics. realchristmastreeboard.org. lets growers and researchers know what's going on. Research areas and results are published on this website. There are also compliance contractors who keep the transactions of the board accurate. realchristmastreeboard.com in the commercial, promotional website. The Real Tree Board also pays the USDA for the privilege of existing.

Keeping the growers who want to sell pre-cuts coordinated with wholesale growers. Buying in a group will help get the numbers. Small, "very observant" buyers who are willing to compromise on what they receive will keep the suppliers selling trees wholesale to a broader base.

Submitted by Emily Grady 1/29/23