

ILLINOIS CHRISTMAS TREE ASSOCIATION—WINTER MEETING with INDIANA CHRISTMAS TREE GROWERS
January 30 & 31, 2026

Experiment well, it seems to be working, so far.

INDIANA GROWN—Caroline Patrick

This organization supports local farms and tourism. 1600 businesses with marketing promotion throughout the state. There are educational webinars, public market at the state fair, social media, television presentations on weekends. Media advisories, press releases; connections with Grown by Heroes is included, as is specialty crop funding. [By the way, there is also Illinois Grown.]

There was a side-step for "classifieds" among the Indiana growers. A "growers' marketplace."

HIRING/HR—Ruth Ann Roney, Tuttle Orchard

Agritourism. The orchard needs a lot of people. The demographic of the employees changes with location, period of time, and understanding of how the operation works, what is being sold, and where it is located.

Efficient use of the staff. If the employees are teenagers, getting them motivated, imparting knowledge, interpersonal skills (internally and with customers). Scheduling is a challenge. Those who can and will work sometimes need odd schedules. "It's about creating a culture, not getting people." The employer needs to lead building a culture where people want to work. Planning for your season starts, at the very least, at the end of that/this season. Be staff focused—at least try.

For hiring and onboarding: The orchard has a staff manual. They have an apple manual. Develop training using sources you'll need to find yourself. Plan for shift leads. Develop job descriptions. Be clear about what is needed for a particular job. You may need to do background checks, depending on the specific job. The orchard may interview up to 350 people. 500 applicants. Potential employees may be great people, but there are people who will not fit your jobs.

Posting for applicants through public media does need to be both inclusive of people and specific to the job to be done. The orchard gets 3 references for every job applicant; a process that is done by email.

Group interviews: Welcome; photo; have an assistant help; 10 minutes for descriptive videos; 10 minutes to build a bridge with legos; 10 minute tour to talk about job options; cash handling skills; impromptu 1 minute talk re apples; give them a scheduling sheet to take home and fill out and return to the one on one. Let them know they may be invited to a one on one.

Make sure potential employees know there are peak days they will be needed, without exception. Nearly all of them are really nice people, and likeable.

The orchard opens Labor Day weekend. The hiring process starts July 5. There are standard situational questions; some of these can be found in books/online. When a person fits the culture of your business, you may have some latitude in finding them a role that may not be the one they thought they applied for.

Orientation is important. Can you do a video? Have other staff talk about the culture. Have team leads talk/train. Talk about the culture as outlined in the staff handbook, if you have one. Have potential employees familiarize themselves with your farm [be thorough, and you'll need to provide more than one tour!]; do customer service training.

"Everybody wants to change the world, but nobody wants to change the toilet paper."

Staff scheduling must be flexible and focused. Set up for long term success. Find what fits and keeps your business staffed, best of luck to you.

Show appreciation in big and small ways. Please. Thank you. Lunch. Snacks. A place to sit and breathe.

Tuttle's culture. No job is "not my job." {get list from AMG}
How do you know who to invite back? Keep track of what/how people do. You'll need a spreadsheet. Be clear. Have a system that is known management-wide and is also available management-wide. Plug everyone into that system. Accept: seasonal staffing is messy. Learn to work with messy.

FARM SHOWCASE: PINEY ACRES TREE FARM—Rex Zenor & Rachel Hardwick.

There are 50 acres of trees. u-cut and pre-cut trees, ornaments, make seasonal family memories on the farm, holiday Hallmark movie, hot cocoa and popcorn, barnyard animals and [resident] deer, Piney Acres Fall Round-up & playground, gem & fossil dig; piney Pete's whistle stop donuts, train and glimmer lights, Santa visits.

2000-2005 planted; 2006 first tree sales; 2007-2008 finally figured out pumpkins that, oddly shaped, sold anyhow. 2010 playground and gem mine added, 2022-2015 added "haunts" and a fall round-up. Started working with a small business ag-focused marketing agency and website developer; did photography shoot. 2016-2019 and a bigger kitchen, dining space, fireplace. 2020 weird year for all. 2024-2026 added a trackless train and launched glimmer lights. Partnered with a local entrepreneur to bring the pond at piney acres to life. Opened the Piney mountain dual slide and a new fossil dig. The second generation, Rachel, Dan and Little Chris, joined the business full time. For 2026 added more. The farm has sponsors and has received grants from tourism boards.

Month-to-month there are activities. January is for planning, February includes planning for Easter, March is for equipment maintaining, stump removal, tree painting by individuals, field trips. April egg hunt; field trips; planting; fertilizer; insecticide and herbicide spraying, tree inspection before/after bud break check for coning and remove. May mowing; trimming; more coning; field trips; spraying and weed control; go before tourism board. Book fall field trips. June: family vacation; mowing; trimming; meetings; spraying, sponsorship reminders; plant pumpkins and sunflowers. October: prime fall season; finalize holiday plans.

Everything is a learning curve. Over the years I talked to people and I listened. Joining industry associations like the ICTGA is good to do. Improvements aren't a wasted effort. The biggest headache over the years has been staffing. Next, I'd love to add turnpike cars [sort of an amusement park ride].

The theme is, more or less, Western. The glimmer light show is stunning. The ride is about 20 minutes, there is a visit with Santa, and hot cocoa and popcorn. The cocoa and popcorn are complimentary, once per customer, with a ticket. Goal: make 'em smile.

There audience questions about liability insurance. The laws vary [widely] between states. There was a question and answer session.

SO, YOU NEED A BUSINESS PLAN?—Alan Binger, Hidden Pines Farm, Clyde, Ohio

Where do I start! Sole proprietor, est. 2000, opened 2007, 30 acres; 15 in trees; 84% fir; 40% gross revenue non-tree.

Benefits of a business plan: Document history of the farm; document important practices & processes; plan for future growth and development; funding requests will require good records; disaster planning helps with succession planning—talk about both! Adds value to the business if selling; IRS proof of Business vs. hobby. Why it took so long: no experience writing a business plan; <https://AgPlan.umn.edu> is a web class in having a business plan.

Cover Page; executive summary; business description; operations; marketing plan; management and organization; financial plan. Developed in 2008 by UofMN. A template for commodity farmers. Included and value-added, agritourism, etc. We were "walked" through parts of the web "course" describing how helpful each section was. Through this course you can have others review your plan.

Business overview. Location. Facilities. Business History. Ownership Structure. Images, maps. Tables of soil types, available resources. Operations: products and services, customer service, inventory management, licenses, permits and regulations; risk management; environmental issues, quality control. Marketing plan: trends, customers, market segments, target market, sales strategy, competition, pricing, promotion, strategic partners. Management & Organization: management Team; advisory board; personnel plan; professional services; volunteers; succession plan. Financial Plan: financial position' historical performance; financial projections; asset management; capital requests. Executive Summary: business summary; mission statement; goals; plan summary; capital request.

Summary: There are many advantages to developing a business plan. AgPlan is a distinct advantage. Keep it updated as markets change and you have new ideas. There can be things you need to delete. One recommendation: keep working in the PDF format. That format will be more flexible in terms of formatting, even a document is not "elegantly crisp and professional." Having all the information available is a big advantage. This PDF format also has table of contents.

Saturday 31 January, 2026

KYLE ALBERTSON—ALBERTSON DRONE SERVICE

Described his company' service capabilities, including the drones and the support equipment that lets the drones to their amazingly efficient work.

5 – 10 gal. per acre; high concentrate applications; minimal ground impact

The presentation included drone footage of drones at work. Fungicides, herbicides (including spot spraying of "trouble patches") seeding, cover crops, and scouting.

Recommendation: contact local agriculture services. Albertson serves mostly within Indiana.

Ballpark of cost per acre: cost per job includes travel, chemicals, acreage. Maybe \$35 per acre, all expenses? The speed and efficiency of application and tank mix will also determine cost. The downward air pressure from the drone propellers increases the efficiency of the application. The height of the drone flight above "canopy" can also be varied to increase efficiency of application. The drone has to adjust its flight to the tallest tree in the "land" of trees being sprayed.

The implication was that overspray/wind drift might not be as big a problem.

The drones are battery powered. The FCC and the FAA have a lot of "say" in what can be flown and where they can be flown. By about 2028, all drones will be U.S. made. Charge time on the batteries is amazing. A sophisticated charger is necessary to recharge the batteries. Recharge time is fast, but you need extra batteries and more than one charger. The cameras have very high resolution.

COMMUNICATION & WORKING WITH YOUR FAMILY—ANDY NICHOLSON, NICHOLSON CONSULTING

Began with an overview of being a part of growing up in a family operation.

Family is hard. Business is hard. Spending time with adult family members is wonderful. Having time for all the adults to be individuals is also wonderful. Communicate clearly. Set expectations. Plan to give more than get.

Why have a "family business but not a family and a business? Family BUSINESS versus FAMILY business. Sometimes family relations can suffer because of business decisions. Sometimes a business can suffer because of family needs. Are we a 90%business and 10%family or a 10%business and 90%family?

The best of both worlds is having good family relationships and a healthy business. We can be friends and we can do business, but we don't have to both. Set clear exit conditions. There have to be exit conditions, like it or not. No one should end up being trapped. You [plural!] will stub your toes. Why would I exit? Why would they exit?

Filling the roles: Everyone has different skills and capabilities.

Business needs: Capital: assets, reputation, relationships, ideas. Decisions: knowledge, experience, risk tolerance, creativity, time. Operations: knowledge, experience, energy, details, creativity, time.

Once a decision is made, it needs to be realized; like it or not; comfortable or not. Don't forget the different skill/experience/available time parameters.

People need: income to pay the bills, meaning, i.e. knowing what they do matters; rest
Linking business needs to people needs: More income? More responsibility, more risk, more duty. The more rest involves less risk, less income, and, especially less control. What do I need to provide more of—or less—to work on what I'm missing? How do you get the people you need when you can't write fat checks. Picture of business value: physical vs abstract; present vs future. Set up transfer of responsibility and ownership. Prove now that you can handle the responsibility then. Set up path the transfer the burdens of ownership. The second generation needs not keep up the standard of care so the 3d generation can keep growing the business, or modifying it in the same footprint to be successful.

The moral of the story: be prepared to give more than you get. Live with the consequences of your and their decisions. Don't be afraid/upset/scared of getting less. Sometimes less is more. Communicate clearly and often. Set expectations that are not carved in granite. PLAN to give more than get, and quite possibly everything will be calmer in the long run.

NCTA & TREES FOR TROOPS/REAL CHRISTMAS TREE BOARD UPDATES

T4T 130 trees donated from Indiana. 90(?) military bases received trees. T4T, NCTA and Real Christmas Tree Board have been working to stay coordinated with each other thanks to the new management company for NCTA and Rick Dungey.

Marsha Gray for RCTB. First there was a video. Videos on social media have increased the sales of real trees as well as attitude toward real Christmas trees.

This is a referendum year. Every 7 years every qualified grower gets a ballot and needs to vote. We pay \$0.15 per tree over 500 trees we sell. We are educational (primary) and research (secondary) about the Christmas tree industry. RCTB is the primary media resource for real trees. NCTA is the secondary source of information, and NCTA provides the White House and Blair House Christmas Trees. Another program is provided to schools, elementary mostly. RCTB sponsors real tree research funding for real trees.

Question: Lessons learned? The number of national-level interviews RCTB did was up. Many of those interviews were through "agenda-setting" media. Today show, Good Morning America who set the "tone" in the secondary media channels and social media. Research budget is up. About \$180K. The advertising is about \$815 [numbers not actual, but the proportion is very close]. RCTB does not disparage artificial trees, but makes a sincere effort to be very "up front" about artificial market and its goals.

GREENERY DEMONSTRATIONS

Note: for porch pots—use a 1 gallon to 2 gallon "drop-in" to keep the price reasonable. Don't sell the pot; sell the arrangement. Greens + "brush" mostly, one or 2 ornamental branches from a floral supply. At the really big "markets" go to the Home & Gift section in Dallas. Cathy Stahl gave a brief overview of going to market that was very helpful. Nearly all vendors have minimums: amounts you need to buy, dollar minimums, know your cancellation dates. Ribbon source: d Stevens [Also Lion Ribbon/Berwick/Offray, Kurt Lee, Reliant] In Illinois there is Bonnett in Milan and [maybe] Bill Doran of Springfield.