

Conservation Corner for December 6, 2016

‘Tis the Season!

By Jodi DeHate
Missaukee & Wexford Conservation District

Thanksgiving is over and our thoughts turn to Christmas. For many families it's not Christmas without a tree. We, in Michigan, and especially Northern Michigan are very lucky to have so many tree farms available for us to choose from for our trees. Michigan ranks 3rd in the nation in Christmas tree production and grows the most diverse varieties of trees in the nation! That's pretty impressive.

Starting from a seed.

Christmas trees start as seedlings or transplants from an operation that specializes in growing conifer seedlings. Northern Pines Nursery just south of Lake City is one of those places. The management for seedlings is more intensive than managing the plant after it's been transplanted. At the nursery the focus is on the soil, just like crop farmers do. They take soil samples, apply fertilizers, amendments, and other products that is required to get the tree seedlings off to a great start. Their focus is on not only developing a great looking seedling, but to develop even better roots so the plant can survive the transplanting

Growing the perfect tree.

Transplanted seedlings may be planted in a field or planted into plastic containers depending on the marketing goals of the farm. Either way, the trees need to be taken care of. How does the farm do this? Well, if you think of Christmas trees as just another crop it's pretty similar to anything else. The only difference is that the farm only harvests each field once every 7 -10 years depending on the variety of the tree.

For optimal growth, trees need water, sunlight, minimal pests, and proper site selection. To improve survival and growth some farms have invested in irrigation such as center pivots, traveling gun irrigation units, trickle/drip irrigation, or a set of sprinklers on a network of pipes called solid sets. The nurseries and the locations with trees in containers tend to use the solid set irrigation or in pot irrigation stakes. Just like corn or hay the trees need water during dry times to produce a good Christmas tree.

One thing that is a bit different from row crops is that tree value is largely determined by their appearance. To maintain the quality of the tree, most growers utilize integrated pest management strategies that help prevent, avoid, or manage pests on the farm. What IPM means is that there is always a pest threshold but once it reaches a certain point the farm needs to do something about the pest or it could decimate the crop. Within Christmas trees these pests actually have predicted times when they are present in the environment and need to be treated. Most of these pests are bugs of some sort. Others are fungi.

How do growers know when to treat their trees? They rely on a prediction model maintained by Michigan State University's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, or industry experts

like MSU Extension's Educator Jill O'Donnell in the Wexford MSU Extension office, and through scouting or going into the fields to look for the pests. Scouting for pests is crucial in all crops sometimes more so in Christmas trees. Sometimes farmers will take needle samples and send them off to be tested for certain diseases or other pests and the results help them determine what course of action to take.

Once the pests are identified growers typically use the correct pesticide at the correct time to control the problem species. Christmas tree growers use similar procedures and practices in spraying pesticides that row crop farmers use. A couple of differences might be in the type of sprayers. Depending on the height of the tree and pest, some growers use backpack sprayers. Backpack sprayers are used for spot treatments or when applications need to be directed and materials kept off the tree. Airblast sprayers use a lot of air to force the pesticide deeper into the tree. Remember the needles are thick on these trees so that you and I can put ornaments on them, so getting the spray past these walls of needles can be a bit challenging.

Soils

The soils that most Christmas trees prefer are a bit sandier than what other crops prefer. Michigan certainly has sandier soils and are a perfect match for Christmas tree production. In the past, when we mainly grew Scotch pine those same soils probably wouldn't be great for feed or food crops like corn, alfalfa, or vegetables. As growers have shifted to growing Fraser fir and other species, soil requirements would be similar to those for feed and food crops.

Erosion may be an issue on some of the fields because of the slope and/or soil type, but with working with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and with the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) farms can get help with preventing erosion or reducing erosion.

Getting those trees to market:

In late fall, crews start cutting, shaking, and baling trees. The Howey family in Merritt created, developed, and sells balers and shakers that many in the industry use. The shaker is just that, it shakes the cut tree so that dead needles and other debris stay in the field and doesn't come with your tree. The baler takes the tree and wraps it in netting for easy shipping. It also helps reduce needle loss and helps the tree retain its shape during shipping. Trees are stored in outdoor lots until they are shipped to their location and then sold for your enjoyment.

Environmentally friendly trees

Real Christmas trees are truly environmentally friendly vs fake trees. Real trees can be recycled, composted, or used for small animal habitat. Potted live trees keep giving after Christmas is done. Can't say that about fake trees.

Tree growers are also conscious about being environmentally friendly with their farming practices. NRCS can help farms meet those goals just as NRCS helps row crop farms and livestock farms. Christmas tree farms are eligible for the same cost share funds that other farms can get. For instance NRCS can help with installing better fuel tanks, better pesticide storage buildings, erosion reduction, stabilizing gullies, and other resource concerns that can be identified by the farmer and often by the MAEAP technician.

Jodi DeHate is the technician for Missaukee, Wexford, Kalkaska, and Crawford counties. Her services are free. It just takes a phone call to her to get the process started. You can contact Jodi by calling her at 231-839-7193, or email her at jodi.dehate@macd.org.



These Christmas trees harvested from a local farm are being loaded for shipment and distribution to places in Michigan and beyond. Our area leads the state in Christmas tree production.



Real Christmas trees, such as these young ones, are an environmentally sound choice. Even so, there are occasionally instances such as this one showing bare soil vulnerable to erosion, where conservation practices can be helpful. Jodi DeHate is available to work with Christmas tree farmers to help identify places where they can reduce soil erosion and techniques to ensure that fertilizers and pesticides do not spread to unintended areas.

This photo has been cropped