

New Jersey grower offers unique Christmas tree species

by Sally Colby

John and Cynthia Curtis were successfully growing Christmas trees and operating a bed and breakfast in Cape May, NJ, but they wanted more acreage. In December 2003, they relocated to a 45-acre farm in Phillipsburg, NJ. Since making that move, they've established more than 40 varieties of Christmas trees; many of which aren't recognized by those who come for the perfect Christmas tree.

John, who has been growing Christmas trees since 1970, lists some of the more common species grown on the former cattle farm. "We have Douglas fir, Concolor fir, Nordmann fir, Fraser fir, balsam fir and Canaan fir, Colorado Blue Spruce," he said. "We also have some Scotch pines — a lot of people grew up with them and that's what they want." However, John says that it's the exotic species that draw attention.

"When I'd see a tree variety that wasn't advertised in the brochures, I'd buy 50 or 100 and try them out," said John, explaining his start with lesser-known species. "Then a man who grew nothing but exotics spoke at our association meeting, and I decided I was going to grow them too. Technically, an exotic tree is one that isn't native to the area." John says he knew he was taking a chance when he tried exotics, but added that people who come to the farm appreciate the experience of seeing so many varieties.

Perfect Christmas Tree Farm is primarily a choose and cut



Despite good air drainage and planting technique, some trees still suffer frost damage. John Curtis says that damaged tips usually grow out and disappear in time for the tree-cutting season.



The King Boris fir, one of the Curtises' exotic species, originates in the mountains of Bulgaria.

Photos by Sally Colby

operation, but precut trees from a nearby tree farm are available too. The Curtises also sell greens for Sukkot, or Feast of Tabernacles; a week-long

autumn Jewish holiday. "They build a temporary shelter; a Shukkah," said John. "It's covered with greens and they eat a meal under it to celebrate the harvest." For Sukkot, the Curtises offer fresh, 3 foot evergreen branches packaged to cover 90 square feet.

Cynthia explained that one of the unique attractions of their operation is that they open their 1780s stone farmhouse to the public. "The entire house is decorated for Christmas," she said. "People like to see the old house with traditional decorations. In the old kitchen, we have a Christmas shop featuring antique items." One draw for children is an old wooden trunk that Cynthia describes as 'a box of things that Santa left behind.' She invites children to select something from the box as a remembrance of their farm experience.

When customers arrive at the farm to select a tree, they're offered a map of the

grounds, a saw, instructions to cut the tree as close to the ground as possible, and a means by which to haul the tree back for shaking, drilling and baling. During choose and cut season, carefully placed signs describe various tree species. Because there's so much diversity in size and variety among the trees at Perfect Christmas Tree Farm, the Curtises sell every tree for the same price, with Scotch pines priced lower.

The top-selling traditional species at Perfect Christmas Tree Farm include Douglas fir and Concolor fir. "I think the Korean fir will be a big seller in the future," said John. "The underside is a different color, and it has very soft needles. I also think the Nordmann fir will be popular.

It has very stiff branches and will hold heavy ornaments well." The Concolor fir is another favorite with its pleas-

ing citrusy odor.

Some of the more exotic fir species John is growing include Arizona corkbark, Algerian, Nikko, Bornmueller and King Boris; a a natural hybrid of the European Silver Fir and the Bornmueller (Turkish) fir native to the mountains of Bulgaria.

Growing exotics comes with challenges, but having experience with growing more common species has helped John learn how to manage unique species. The slope of the farm helps minimize damage to trees during late frosts, although some species that have early bud break are still at risk for frost damage. John noted that bud break is usually in early May, but this year it was in mid-April. "Trees like Arizona corkbark, needle fir and Ernest fir (discovered in China by English plant collector Ernest Wilson) have early bud break, and we have some frost damage almost every year," he said.

John does most of the replanting in spring, and tries to maintain each variety in a designated area. Excess vegetation within rows is managed with herbicide, and mowing between rows keeps that area neat. Deer damage is minimized with the help of electric fence surrounding the fields.

Perfect Christmas Tree Farm recycles trees after Christmas, and holds events such as an annual Earth Day celebration. During Christmas, they take donations for a local charity. "It brings a lot of people to the farm," said Cynthia, referring to the extra activities. "Hopefully they will come back for a tree."

The Curtises are active in their state Christmas tree organization, and John represented New Jersey for the National Christmas Tree Association for eight years. "It's a good group that helps all growers," said Cynthia of the state organization. "We have a winter convention with speakers from Rutgers, and a summer meeting at a farm." The Curtises offer a newsletter 'Treeditons' maintain a Facebook page, are active on Twitter and recently had a video made for their website.

Most customers are local, although some come from New York City and neighboring New Jersey counties. "If they're looking for a certain tree, they can find it here," said John.

Visit Perfect Christmas Tree Farm online at www.perfectchristmastree.net

Some of the more exotic fir species John is growing include Arizona corkbark, Algerian, Nikko, Bornmueller and King Boris.

Future of demand for traditional Green Industry and Agriculture

by Sanne Kure-Jensen

While the U.S. economy declined in the last five years, growth in the Horticulture Industry led all other "Green Industry" sectors. In the past couple of years, the other sectors (Landscaping, Agriculture, Turf, etc.) have caught up as the Horticulture segment matured.

Dr. Charlie Hall, of Texas A & M University, said the Green Industry is "doing more with fewer people." There are fewer businesses, each with fewer employees.

Economic Trends

In basic economic terms, demand in the Green Industry has declined. Supplies were too plentiful. Today we face hyper-competition and cost-centric consumers.

To survive, most businesses have reduced their cost of doing business. Since most Green Industry businesses spend an average of 25 percent of their income on production and 40 to 50 percent on labor and distribution, these are the areas to streamline. Be sure to price labor right and pay attention to water use. Dr. Hall advised business leaders to monitor water use, community watering regulations and customers' opportunities for new and existing plantings.

Housing Trends

There have been eleven recessions or depressions since 1948. Dr. Hall advised businesses to position themselves to resist the next one(s).

Housing starts are expected to grow at 1 to 2 percent over the next few years as existing inventory is sold and the number of foreclosures declines. The McMansion Era is over; new homes will be smaller, greener and more efficient than ever before.

Many people think of landscaping and outdoor plants as a luxury to skimp on in tight times. We need to convert fine landscaping into a necessity.

Recommended Marketing - sell Quality of Life

Dr. Hall recommended, "Tell your story!" Our industry has been reluctant to extol the many benefits our products and services provide to customers. Using basic economic terms, we need to increase the perceived value of our goods and services above the price. Dr. Hall said, "Stop selling on price alone; offer a good value and a valuable service."

To become recession-proof, teach customers, "we enhance peoples' lives!" We provide vital benefits to customers' health and well-being. Remind homeowners that landscaping is the only home improvement that yields a positive investment; you can earn back more than a dollar for every dollar spent on improvements. Home values grow up to four times customer's investments in colorful shrubs, perennials and annuals.

Remind customers that we provide vital benefits to their health and well-being. "We sell Oxygen Generators and ecosystem services," said Dr. Hall. Studies have shown that children learn better, productivity improves and sick people recover faster when they see plants or the natural environment. This

can be as simple as a vase of cut flowers, window views of trees, a lovely garden or even photographs of outdoor scenes.

Retailing

Dr. Hall defines the three-legged stool of retail selling as value, authenticity and relevancy. Offer customers great shopping experience and real benefits, and you will keep them happy and coming back for more.

Respond to demographic trends, offer more indoor products such as green walls, hydroponic systems and edible houseplants.

Demographics

Market sizes are changing. As aging Seniors die or move to assisted living centers, those who need outdoor plants and landscaping services decreases. The first Baby Boomers are turning 65 this year and many are planning to be 100, fit and active, so they may not need as many services as other age cohorts. Many want urban living with walkable communities.

The 45 to 55 cohort is earning the most and spending the most; many are underwater with their mortgages. They also pay the largest taxes, therefore, they have the least left over for landscape products and services.

The Generation Y cohort is under 25 years old. They are the best-educated and greenest generation yet, according to Professors Hall and Sproul. These students saw all the foreclosures and underwater mortgages and have over \$1 trillion in college debts, so they are in no hurry for home ownership. Dr. Hall said the Gen Ys often show "herding behavior" and are likely to rent multi-

units housing for many years.

In the next decade, an estimated \$7 trillion will transition between generations. The government will get as much as half of this money, but the beneficiaries (mostly Boomers) will have disposable income for Green Industry products and services. Be ready! Make your message all about a comfortable, healthy Lifestyle and Outdoor Living.

Significant Economic Impact

Dr. Tom Sproul of URI participated in a multiyear study to measure the impact of the Green Industry in RI. Included were all aspects of Agriculture, Horticulture, Landscaping, Floriculture, Golf, etc. Not included in this study were forestry and wood products, seafood, fishing, aquaculture and natural resources including eco-tourism.

The Green Industry has traditionally been vastly undercounted. For example, the team found that RI has four times the number of florist businesses that the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported. Few people knew that Rhode Island golf courses and country clubs generated over \$140 million per year in direct revenues.

Rhode Island is a small state with high value, highly diversified agriculture that varies considerably across its five counties. RI has unusually many farmers who produce on small farms and offer value-added products. Also unusual is the high number of RI farmers who sell wholesale capturing extra income rather than working with distributors. Many Rhode Island farmers welcome customers for on-farm agri-tourism experiences, farm stands or CSA pickups.

Being conservative with every figure extrapolated to the State level, the Green Industry accounts for nearly 4 percent of the state's annual economy.

Sproul and his team found 2,570 Green Industry businesses generated over \$1 billion in annual direct sales with another \$760 million indirect impact, for a total economic impact of \$1.78 billion. The largest sector was Landscape firms accounting for about one third or over \$600 million in total economic impact. This next largest sector includes retail lawn and garden centers, florists, outdoor power equipment, plant brokers and landscape suppliers (paving, mulch, seed, etc.) with an impact over \$500 million. The agriculture sector including food, fiber and fuel crop growers, dairy farmers, cut flower and sod growers and wholesale nurseries had a net impact of \$268 million.

Over 8,700 people are employed in RI's Green Industry jobs including farms, nurseries, landscaping firms, retail garden centers, florists, golf courses and related equipment and service suppliers. The largest sector is landscaping firms with over 3,000 arborists, parks and recreation staff, lawn and landscaping service providers, landscape architects and designers as well as masonry contractors. The agriculture sector, as defined above, employs almost 1,800 people.

Dr. Hall described the benefits of industry sectors working together with powerful voices and the clout that realistic impact numbers provide when regulations or water restrictions are threatened. Mike Sullivan of URI agreed, "Use these Economic Impact Study results; make noise and be heard. Help reduce our industry's regulations to a manageable level. Help maintain and expand University's Sustainable Agriculture and Horticulture departments to turn out the next generation of talented farmers, growers, landscapers, turf and flower experts."

Shannon Brawley, Executive Director of the RI Nursery & Landscape Association, noted. "Unusual partnerships will yield powerful results; we are all responsible for our industry and our environment."

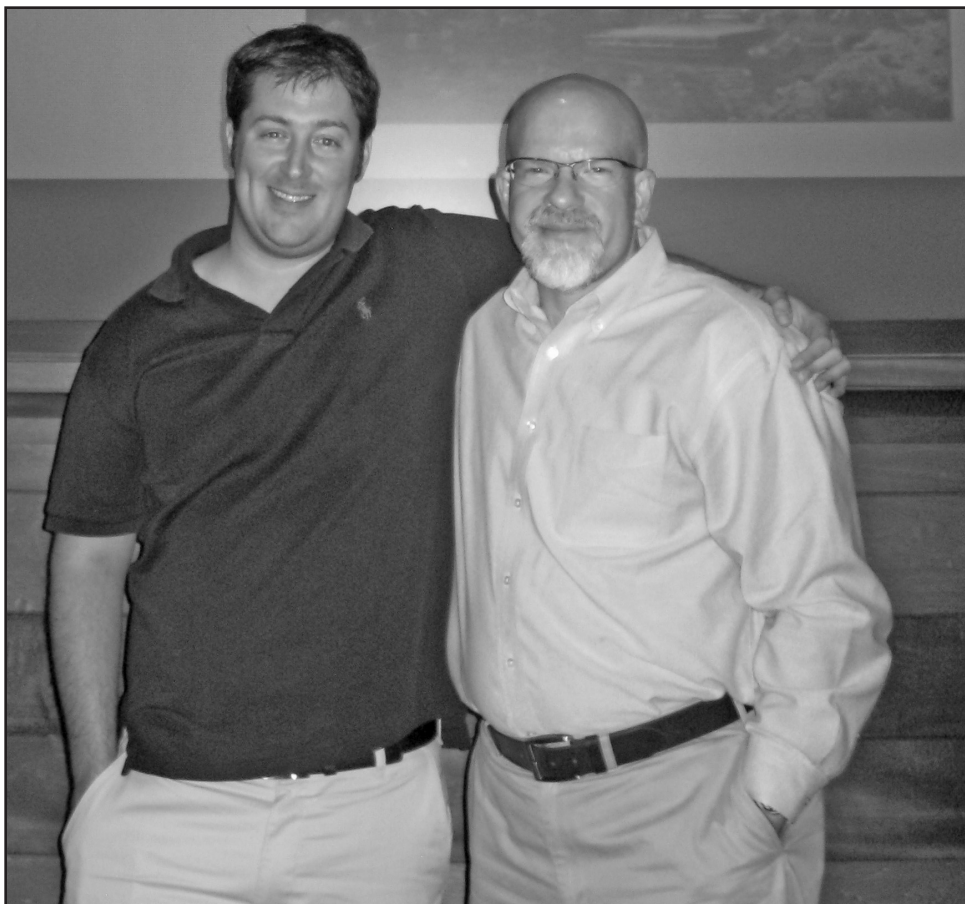
Opportunities

Both Dr. Hall and Dr. Sproul recommended advising children and students to go into Agriculture and Green Industry fields. Things will pick up. Today just 23 large producers supply big box stores with plants; they cannot keep up with orders so most use subcontractors. "There are so many exciting opportunities ahead," said Dr. Hall.

Young people are excited about growing food and working in all sectors of Green Industries. Our industry needs to develop businesses independent of new construction and development at the expense of open spaces. All of us will benefit from our beautiful outdoors, both managed and natural open spaces.

For more information, contact Dr. Hall via email at charliehall@tamu.edu or call 979-458-3277.

Contact Dr. Sproul at email sproul@mail.uri.edu or call 401-874-9196.



Dr. Tom Sproul, Assistant Professor of Environmental and Natural Resource Economics at URI, and Dr. Charlie Hall, Horticultural Professor and Ellison Endowed Chair in International Floriculture at Texas A & M University, speaking on Green Industry Trends and Economic Impacts at a RI Nursery & Landscape Association Twilight Meeting hosted by URI.

Photos by Sanne Kure-Jensen

Highway sign program promotes New Jersey on-farm activities

Departments of Agriculture, Transportation join to support Agritourism

New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Douglas H. Fisher and Deputy Transportation Commissioner Joseph Mrozek visited Alstede Farms in Chester Township, one of 23 agritourism operations in the state benefitting from highway signs directing drivers to their locations.

Working with the Department of Agriculture, the New Jersey Department of Transportation significantly revised its Tourist

Oriented Destination Sign (TODS) program and tailored it to the needs of agritourism in an effort to help agricultural businesses build their base of regular customers and attract high numbers of tourists.

“People love to visit local farms at this time of year for Jersey Fresh apples and pumpkin picking, hayrides and corn mazes,” said Secretary Fisher. “The ability to place a series of directional signs on roadways leading to the

farm will go a long way toward helping consumers reach their desired destination and increasing business for farmers.”

The new regulations allow agritourism businesses to place signs on state highways up to 10 miles from their location, and the operations can be several turns off of those roadways if there is a chain of signage leading to the facilities. The businesses must be open a minimum of six hours each day, five days

a week during their growing or operating season. There is an annual fee of \$400 for each sign. The rules take into account that agritourism is usually a seasonal business, exempting them from certain provisions.

“New Jersey boasts beautiful rural landscapes that are dotted with farms, wineries and other tourist attractions just waiting to be discovered,” said Deputy Commissioner Mrozek. “The Department’s Tourist Oriented Directional Signing (TODS) program is a great way for agriculture-centered businesses and other rural establishments to raise their profile and attract customers.”

NJDOT regulations define agritourism as “a style of tourism that offers activities that occur on a farm and are related to the agricultural use of the farm site, including but not limited to: on-farm sales of agricultural products directly to the consumer, such as roadside farm markets, community farm markets, pick-your own operations, you-cut Christmas trees or wineries; educational activities and tours; entertainment, such as corn mazes, hay rides, seasonal festivals, petting zoo or haunted barns; and outdoor recreation and lodging. This definition recognizes that agriculture includes a broad range of activities including, but not limited to api-

aries, aquaculture, fruits and vegetables, grain, dairy, poultry, livestock, equine activities, nurseries and greenhouses.”

Agritourism is important to the state’s economy, generating \$60 million annually and generates additional revenues in a wide range of other allied businesses, such as restaurants, construction companies and insurance providers. More than one-fifth of New Jersey farms offer some form of agritourism, with 43 percent of New Jersey’s total farmland associated with farm operations engaging in agritourism.

Kurt Alstede, owner of Alstede Farms, has participated in the TODS program for 12 years, placing signs on Route 206 directing drivers to turn onto Route 513 to reach his farm. The new regulations have allowed him to place additional signs on Route 10 in Randolph. He said the signs are especially helpful to him since his farm is on a road with four different names, none of which work in online mapping programs.

“The signs are one more piece of the puzzle that helps them get to their destination,” said Alstede. “They are more than directional signs; they also function as an advertisement.”

Alstede, a first generation farmer who grew up in Chester, founded Alstede Farms in 1982 and now cultivates 600 acres, where he grows apples, peaches, strawberries, raspberries, cur-

rants, gooseberries, pumpkins, corn, tomatoes and many other vegetables. The farm includes a retail market and fall agritourism activities, including a corn maze, hay rides, pony rides, and pick-your-own pumpkins. The farm has more than 13,000 square feet of greenhouses where over 200 varieties of ornamental products are grown. Almost every acre of the farm is permanently preserved.

The Tourist Oriented Directional Signing program was started by NJDOT in 1999. It is designed to identify tourist-oriented facilities — such as farm stands, wineries, bed & breakfast inns and flea markets — that are not located on the state highway system. These signs alert motorists of the proximity of a destination and guide motorists from the highway to the destination. Strategically placed smaller trail-blazing signs help motorists navigate unfamiliar county roads. Since 1999, 440 businesses have participated in the TODS program, including many agritourism businesses such as Alstede Farms.

A variety of agricultural operations are currently participating in the TODS program, from pick-your-own farms and wineries to farm markets and garden centers. To learn more, visit www.newjerseytods.interstatelogs.com/state/home.aspx or call 888-655-6467 or 609-406-9525.

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John Curtis, who has been growing
Christmas trees since 1970, takes pride in
the exotic species on his New Jersey farm.

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(L - R): Secretary Fisher and Deputy Transportation commissioner Joseph Mrozek at Alstede Farms, with one of the TODS signs.

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