



Cooperative Extension Service
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Florida Christmas Tree Production



Commercial Florida Christmas tree production has been the dream of countless Floridians over the years. Many have tried, but few growers have remained in the business for many years.

As a supplemental income, hobby-type operation, growing Florida Christmas trees may be fun and profitable. Too often growers begin too big and are unable to keep up with all the care that needs to be given the trees. Remember, Christmas tree production is labor intensive — not a once-a-year fun thing. The result of too little planning often is a neglected field of redcedar, Leyland cypress, sand pine, spruce pine or perhaps Virginia pine that contains very few nice looking, saleable trees. Other southeastern states today have growers planting millions of Virginia pine. If this tree proves to grow well in Florida it will be an attractive species to plant, at least in parts of west Florida where climate and other conditions are similar to other southeastern states. However, conditions in peninsular Florida may not be right for Virginia pine.

Choose-and-Cut: The Way to Go

After being cut, Florida trees dry out quickly unless cared for as they never really go dormant in our warm climate. Almost all Florida trees are sold on location as choose-and-cut trees or are freshly cut a few days before selling them in small numbers on a local lot in town. Research is needed on practical and economical ways to keep Florida grown trees fresh on the retail lot.



Marketing Opportunities

Probably 200 to 500 or more native Florida-grown trees may be sold at Christmas in one location near any fairly large town. The selling price of a 3-to-5-year-old choose-and-cut tree 5-to-7 feet high is usually \$18 to \$20. The wholesale price of Florida grown trees may be lower.

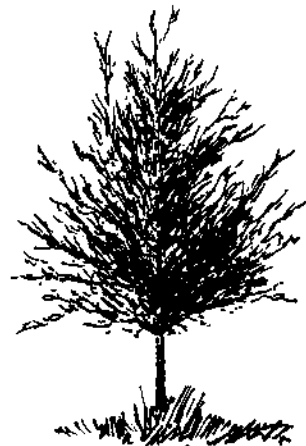
At the time of harvest, you probably have about \$2 invested in each tree plus lots of hard labor for shaping, shearing, weed control and fighting a host of bugs and diseases. Labor and other factors would bring this total cost to about \$4 per tree (not counting the cost of the land). This is less than the transportation cost paid for shipping many northern trees.



Labor Necessary - But Hard to Find

Finding local labor who can or will learn to cultivate Christmas trees is very difficult. If you have more than an acre of trees (6'x6' spacing or about 1,210 trees per acre), shaping or shearing the trees 2 to 3 times a year for 3 to 4 years or more may be considered cruel and unusual punishment (especially on a hot, humid, gnat-filled Florida summer afternoon in a plantation with an

above average number of wasp nests). Shearing trees with knives, backpack mowers or even hand clippers can be quite dangerous. Be sure your labor is knowledgeable and trustworthy. Teen-agers (especially your own!) working for a couple of hours an afternoon after school often need quite a lot of supervision.



If You Still Want to Try

Select the best land you have and prepare it as you would for an agricultural crop - old field sites are excellent for planting Christmas trees. By mid-summer have the land selected and have it well prepared by fall. Perhaps also use a pre-emergent herbicide according to dealer's instructions for your soil. (Remember the sandier the soil, the more active the herbicide.)

Locate a source of good seedlings by late summer well ahead of the tree planting season (mid-November through February). The Division of Forestry produces and sells most species suitable for Florida Christmas tree production - see your county forester for seedling application blanks and tree planting information. Check into this soon after July 1. Decide well in advance of planting how it will be done and who will do it and where planting tools will be available when you need them.

Plant and care for seedlings properly. Try to choose a time when rain is likely. Plant trees quickly and carefully soon after receiving them. Dry weather, improper care of seedlings and improper planting doom many plantations from the beginning. Irrigation systems can sometimes be profitably installed. Check with your local county agent for details.



Continue controlling weeds by mowing and the use of herbicides (check with county extension personnel or chemical supply stores for latest recommendations which can change rapidly). Do not rely on information written for other locations or soil types. Read the label and abide by it.

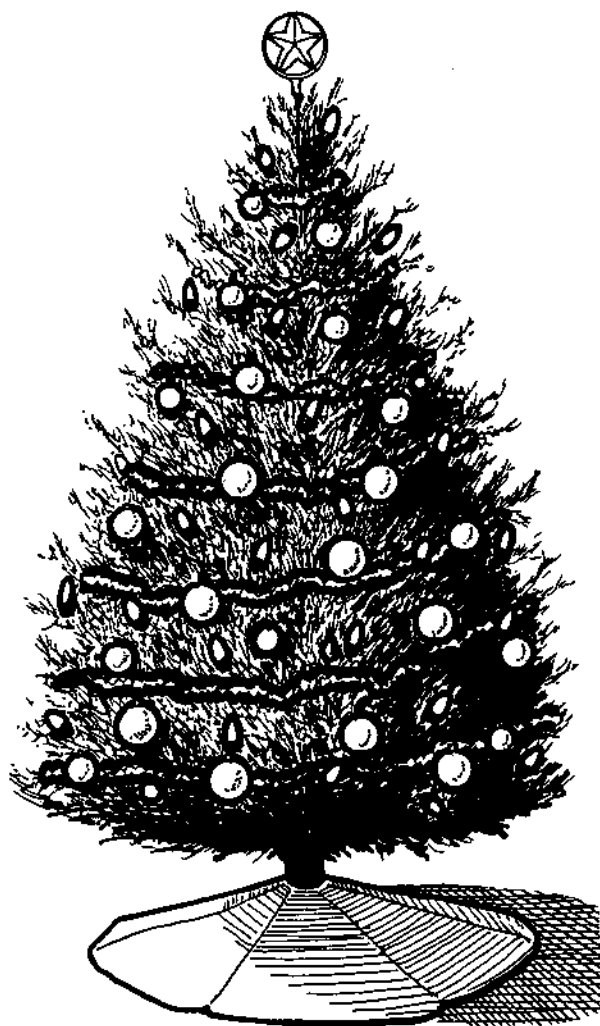
Fertilize trees according to soil test recommendations. Usually Christmas trees don't require much fertilizer. Often fertilizer only increases the weed problem and may cause the trees themselves to grow too fast. Consider using newly developed slow-release fertilizer tablets which may be placed in the root zone away from surface weeds.

Shape and shear trees during the second growing season when new growth has stopped but before it hardens off, perhaps in mid-April. Another shearing may be necessary in mid-July. Sometimes three shearings are required. Some growers say a good rule of thumb is to shear after the trees reach waist height and whenever you get 6 to 8 inches of new growth. Use your imagination when shaping and shearing. Try to have a variety of tree shapes and fullness, especially for a choose-and-cut operation. Some people still prefer more open trees with space to hang ornaments. Sometimes sheared pines grow to resemble conical sections of manicured hedge that defy attempts to attach a free-hanging ornament.

Spray for insect and disease control. You may need to spray once a month from March through September. Virginia pines especially are heavily damaged by pine tip moths (*Rhyacionia* spp.) and a redcedar plantation can become a total loss if juniper blight (*Phomopsis* and *Cercospora* spp.) or mites (*Tirsetaeus cupressi*) go unchecked. Do not let insects and diseases get ahead of you. Inspect your trees weekly during warm weather. Tree neglect is the major cause of plantation failure. Proper timing in applying chemicals is very important.

Protect your trees from fire and theft (sometimes hard to do).

Plan the operation so trees will be ready for harvest every year. Too often poor planning causes an operator to reach the time when he may have dozens of customers seeking trees but no trees ready to sell. Plant 20 to 25% of your acreage each year so you will not run out of saleable trees. Begin small and grow as you learn.



Marketing Trees

In 3 to 5 years you should have trees for sale: 5-to-7 foot trees sell best. Locate markets or advertise your choose-and-cut operation in local papers and on radio. Small quantities may be cut and sold on local lots, but do not cut more native trees ahead of time than you can sell within 3 to 4 days. Remember, not all trees on an acre are ready to cut in the same year. You must decide when the remaining unsold trees must be plowed up so another crop can be planted. Locate markets well before the Christmas season (by Thanksgiving, at least). Advertising is important! Radio, newspapers, and road signs are suggested. After your operation becomes known you can ease up. In a few years you may even find the confusion and hassle of a choose-and-cut operation too much to take. Do not count on continuing to depend on family labor.

Summary

- An excellent market for choose-and-cut trees exists in Florida, but unless you plan to produce quality trees don't begin.
- Sand pine, Virginia pine, southern redcedar and Leyland cypress are species which may be successfully grown in Florida.
- Due to the labor-intensive nature of Florida Christmas tree production, few producers remain in business for many years, but as old growers quit new growers begin production.
- Plan your operation carefully before investing much money. Begin small - learn as you go along.

- Decide how much land you wish to plant. Remember to plant only 20-25% of it per year so you'll have trees for sale every year once you begin. Draw a plan showing the blocks to be planted.
- Space trees so equipment and people have easy access.
- Choose-and-cut operations require especially careful planning to allow for parking and access to the area being cut. Minimize threat of theft, and having your house and yard overrun by customer kids, dogs and grandfathers all wanting to get a drink of water or use your bathroom.

The Florida Christmas Tree Association

In January, 1980, the Florida Christmas Tree Association was organized. The purpose of this organization is to bring together people interested in Florida Christmas tree production and to encourage Florida Christmas tree research among growers themselves, as well as by the University and industrial forestry organization. If you would like to know more about the Florida Christmas Tree Association, you may call them, toll-free, during regular business hours, at 1-800-554-TREE (1-800-554-8733).

Other Sources of Information: Local county foresters of the state's Division of Forestry, county extension specialists, and local growers may all be of help and assistance.