Forsyth Field Notes

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Specialty crop: Christmas Trees

The tradition of bringing greenery into the home during winter has a history that spans many centuries and several cultures. For most of them, evergreen branches symbolized renewal of life and anticipation of the fresh fruits and vegetables that spring brings. So how did the tradition of bringing a whole tree indoors get started? Who knows. Maybe some 10-thumbs decorator like me couldn’t weave evergreen branches into a wreath, and opted for a preassembled version.

What we do know is that German settlers in Pennsylvania introduced cut Christmas trees to the colonies in the mid-1700s, but it took around 100 years for the practice to catch on in other parts of America. In the early 1900s, partly in response to overharvesting of evergreen trees from the nation’s forests, farmers began growing Christmas trees as a specialty crop. Today, some 350 million Christmas trees are growing on about 350,000 acres throughout all 50 states. Many Christmas tree farms are family owned and operated.

In 2016, Georgia Christmas tree growers contributed over $10 million to the state’s economy. We have farms in 75 counties (including several metropolitan counties) devoting 1,432 acres to growing a wide variety of cedars, cypress, spruces, and pines for use as Christmas trees. Many of these farms are open to the public and offer family fun adventures, such as hay rides, petting farms, marshmallow roasting, visits with Santa, and gift shops. On-farm shoppers can choose pre-cut trees, ramble the farm to select and cut their own perfect tree, or purchase living trees that can be planted after the holidays.

Planting living trees

Keep living trees watered and in a bright, sunny location during the holidays. Gradually reintroduce the tree to the outdoors by placing it outside for a couple of hours in the morning or on a cloudy day, and slowly increasing the hours of outdoor exposure over several days. Keep the mature size of the tree in mind. Some species of Christmas trees exceed 60 feet in height and 30 feet in girth. During the first year, transplanted trees need about an inch of water each week.
Despite the success of Georgia Christmas tree farms, we still import half of all trees sold from other states to meet the annual demand for real Christmas trees. Our neighbor, North Carolina, is second only to Oregon in annual production. Here are some more fun facts about real Christmas tree production:

- With the exception of Leyland cypress, most cultivated Christmas tree species are genetically very similar to their wild-growing kin.
- Depending on species, Christmas trees require 4-15 years to reach the typical 6- to 7-foot harvest height.
- As they grow on the farm, Christmas trees clean pollutants from the air, absorb carbon dioxide, produce oxygen, stabilize soil to prevent erosion, and provide habitats for many species of wildlife.
- Christmas tree farmers plant 1-3 seedlings for each tree harvested.
- Keep Georgia Beautiful partners with sponsors throughout the state to support Christmas tree recycling. The Bring One for the Chipper program has reduced some 6 million real Christmas trees into mulch.
- Mulch from recycled Christmas trees is available for free and is excellent for weed suppression, erosion control, and soil improvement in public and private landscapes.

Although Christmas trees require a longer growth cycle than many Georgia crops, they are a viable option for small farms and agritourism enterprises. The Georgia Christmas Tree Association provides information on starting a Christmas tree farm, and the University of Georgia’s Journeyman Farmer Certificate Program offers Small Farm Business Planning training, as well as production training, for new and small-scale farmers.

Forsyth celebrates Farm-City Week

Although we may not see them, farmers are part of nearly every aspect of our daily lives. Farmers produce the raw materials for the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the wood that supports and furnishes our homes, the grapes in a celebratory bottle of wine, and even the cork that stoppers the bottle. Georgia farmers grow $72.5 billion in agricultural products annually, and these products support additional industries, such as food processors, clothing manufacturers, transportation, and retail sales, expanding the economic impact of Georgia agriculture to $786.5 billion.

While Forsyth County’s population has grown exponentially over the past two decades, farming is still an important component of the county’s economy, ambiance, and appeal. Local producers grow a wide variety of vegetables and fruits, including blueberries, strawberries, and watermelons, as well as fresh
eggs, honey, and meat products that are seasonally available through farmers markets, on-farm sales, and CSAs. Local farmers also sell their products to restaurants, retailers, and food processors.

Forsyth County recognized Farm-City Week with several activities during the week of November 13-17.

Forsyth County’s newest Commissioner, Dennis Brown (seated), joined local farmers and Farm Bureau members Nathan Dupree, Wesley Hall, Michael Bennett, and Dean Cates (standing left to right) for the annual Farm-City Week breakfast at the Forsyth County Farm Bureau office on November 15.

Students from SFHS International Club joined Forsyth County Extension Master Gardener volunteers to plant over 20 fruit trees and small fruits in the Forsyth County Sustainable Community Orchard at Chattahoochee Pointe Park on November 15.

Forsyth County Board of Commissioners read a Farm-City Week proclamation at the regular board meeting on Thursday, November 16 acknowledging the achievements of the 1 in 7 Georgians who work in agriculture, forestry, and related fields and the $72.5 billion annual contribution that agriculture makes to Georgia’s economy. Pictured left to right are District 5 Commissioner Laura Semanson, District 1 Commissioner Pete Amos, local farmers Wesley Hall and Lanier Warbington, District 4 Commissioner Cindy Jones Mills, District 3 Commissioner Todd Levent, District 2 Commissioner Dennis Brown, and UGA Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Agent Heather Kolich.
In addition, local farmers and Farm Bureau members Suzanne Geddes of The Cumming Harvest, Chuck Pugh of Cane Creek Farm, and Forsyth County Extension agents Barbara Worley and Heather Kolich read books about farming to over 600 Kindergarten students at Coal Mountain, Kelly Mill, Sawnee, and Whitlow elementary schools.

**Let’s Look: Invasive Species BOLO for Chinese Privet (Ligustrum sinense)**

Chinese privet has held the #1 ranking for worst invasive plant in the [Georgia Forestry Commission’s Dirty Dozen list](http://extension.uga.edu/county-offices/forsyth.html) since 2009. In use since the mid-1800’s as hedges and ornamental plantings, the shrub escaped cultivation during the 1930s and had colonized forests across the southeastern U.S. by the 1950s. Birds and wildlife eat the berries and disperse seeds to natural landscapes. Newly established privet shrubs then spread through root suckers and form dense thickets that outcompete native plants and disrupt the ecological balance of the area. Birds and wildlife that depend on the native plants move away, further diminishing the biodiversity of the ecosystem.

Because it is evergreen, privet is easy to spot right now, and winter is a good opportunity to take control measures. For small plants, spray leaves with a 3-5 percent solution of glyphosate (the active ingredient in herbicides such as Roundup). For larger shrubs, cut off the branches and immediately paint the privet stump with concentrated glyphosate or triclopyr (found in products such as Brush-B-Gone). [Read more](http://extension.uga.edu/county-offices/forsyth.html).

**Protect Water Pipes from Freezing**

Winter weather can cause water pipes to freeze and burst. Take these precautions to protect your pipes:

- Outdoors, disconnect garden hoses from exterior faucets, then shut off water to the faucet and drain the pipe.
- Indoors, during periods of freezing temperatures, open the doors of cabinets, laundry closets, and other spaces housing water pipes so that heated air can circulate around the pipes, and leave at least one faucet dripping.

Visit our website for more events, opportunities, and lots of useful information: [http://extension.uga.edu/county-offices/forsyth.html](http://extension.uga.edu/county-offices/forsyth.html)

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