

# AGROFORESTY ON THE FARM

FISHER TREE FARMS CHRISTMAS TREES

CLEAR LAKE, IOWA

MARK FISHER | 2014



## About the Farm

Fisher Trees is adjacent to Pilot Knob State Park in Hancock County, Iowa, and is a haven for deer, turkey, and other game and non-game species. The Christmas tree operation represents only a portion of the farm. Additional acres are seeded to grass or food plots for wildlife. On weekends starting after Thanksgiving, families arrive at the farm to find and cut that special tree to take home and decorate. Tree sizes range from five feet to more than twelve feet in height.

Mark Fisher of Clear Lake started growing Christmas trees almost as a fluke. An ardent deer hunter, he was hunting with a friend near Pilot Knob State Park in Hancock County, Iowa, when he learned of 20 acres of prime deer hunting ground that was coming up for sale. The property was rough ground not suited for agriculture, and after walking the property to scout for potential deer stands, Mark decided to buy it. He enjoyed time spent on the property observing nature, but he also started thinking about the possibilities for his 20-acre parcel. Mark said, "I've always enjoyed trees, I've always enjoyed real Christmas trees, so I figured why not."

Mark is quick to point out that his situation and circumstances are less than ideal for growing Christmas trees, but he has managed to do pretty well so far. Having enough space for the trees to grow and the risk of crowding the trees too closely are challenging, but predation from deer pressure and less-than-ideal soil type are even more challenging.



Mark stands under one of his "lollipop" trees which will be harvested once the top is large enough to be cut.

“The major problem we have here, the biggest challenge,” Mark says, “is deer. It makes sense since I purchased the property specifically for deer, but now that I’m a Christmas tree grower, they are a big problem.” To address the deer problem, Mark built a 9-foot fence around several areas on the farm where he grows Christmas trees. This has helped to reduce deer predation and damage but has the negative effect of limiting the area where he can plant trees since they will only survive inside the fenced area.

The most popular varieties of Christmas trees are the Fraser, Canaan, and Balsam Fir and they require well-drained, lighter soils. They simply will not grow successfully in heavy or poorly drained areas because they tend to get phytophthora root rot and eventually die in these conditions. Mark only has a single hill of well-drained soil on the entire property where he can grow the firs, thus it is fenced and he tries to make the most of the limited space. In addition to the firs, he also grows some Scotch Pine and White Pine; the pines are more adapted to the heavier soils and can grow virtually anywhere on the farm.

Seedlings are purchased for \$1.00 each and planted into any empty spot within the fenced orchard or re-planted into containers for a year or two before they are moved into one of the fenced areas. Once planted, maintenance of trees is fairly straightforward. Weed control is important because the trees do not compete well with grass and weeds. Mark mows and sprays to keep weeds in check. Watering is also important, especially on the well-drained soils where the firs are growing as the water-holding capacity is limited. Watering is done with old 5-gallon buckets or crop oil jugs that have a small hole poked in the side, allowing a trickle of water to slowly moisten the tree’s roots. Mark shapes the trees with a hedge trimmer to improve the look of the trees by forcing branches to send out more buds, making the tree bushier and helping to fill in gaps in the foliage. Aesthetics are important to families choosing the perfect Christmas tree, so open spots in the tree are undesirable.



Mark does not fertilize the pines because they already grow fast enough and adding fertilizer would mean more trimming for him. However, the firs do respond to fertilizer. Dry granular nitrogen can be spread at the base of the trees at a rate of one ounce per one foot of tree height. (A 6-foot tree would get six ounces.) This also helps the trees keep their nice green color into the fall, before they are cut.

## Marketing and Economics



Mark sells pre-cut trees from his home in Clear Lake, Iowa, along Highway 18. Families can also visit the farm to cut their own Christmas trees. "It's really fun to see families come out here to harvest their own real Christmas tree," Mark said. "It's a joy and it's fun to be out here." He advertises his trees and of course repeat customers are a big part of his business.

Whether pre-cut or sold standing, Mark gets the same price for a Christmas tree, \$5 per foot for the pines to \$8 per foot for the firs. A premium is placed on the firs because of the additional time and effort it takes to grow the firs compared to the pines. Most trees are sold when they reach 6 or 7 feet in height. A few customers are interested in the large 15-foot trees, but Mark does not purposefully grow them that large. "I inevitably have some trees that get overlooked for one reason or another when they are small, but eventually they will get harvested as Christmas trees," Mark said.

Christmas trees require very few inputs and with seedlings costing only a couple of dollars each, they have a low establishment cost. The greatest production expenditure is the hand labor required to care for the trees and maintain the orchard. For Mark it is a perfect fit to keep him busy and active in retirement. On average it takes eight to nine years to grow a Christmas tree to marketable size, with pines requiring less time and firs not reaching marketable size for ten or more years.

## Lessons Learned

Mark says that patience was the hardest lesson for him to learn. Even under ideal conditions, it takes significant time to reach harvest and to realize an income. “You have to constantly stay vigilant about getting the trees watered in a drought, protecting from deer and other pests, and replacing trees that have been harvested,” Mark says.

In general terms, Mark strongly suggests doing research to ensure a planting location has the correct soil type and conditions to grow Christmas trees successfully. A great resource for such research in Iowa is the Iowa Christmas Tree Growers Association. Members of this association are experienced growers willing to share the lessons they learned while they were getting started. The group has annual meetings and field days each year.

Finally, Mark points out that while having a good location helps with marketing because it increases visibility, the farm where he grows Christmas trees is fairly difficult to access, yet families are willing to drive the distance, walk through the snow to get to the fenced area, and cut down the tree of their choosing. As Mark explains, “Christmas trees are seasonal and many people still hold to tradition, wanting a real live tree. I’m always surprised at how many still want to choose their own.”

To learn more , visit [www.TreesForever.org/acceleratingagroforestry](http://www.TreesForever.org/acceleratingagroforestry)  
or contact us at [info@treesforever.org](mailto:info@treesforever.org).

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