

Trees take shape



TOM TRECHTER (left) and Andy Cole bought Mathisen Tree Farms in 1997.

By **JENNIFER VINCENT**

WHETHER it be a customer, employee, mail carrier or input dealer, there's no discrimination. No one entering the Mathisen Tree Farm office gets past her wagging tail and wet nose. When she's not hanging out in the office, she's riding shotgun with her tongue hanging in the wind. Kalea, a 2-year-old pointing lab, rarely leaves her owner's side. So when Tom Trechter asks if it's OK if Kalea rides along on a tour of the farm, who could

Key Points

- Christmas trees take seven to 15 years before they're ready for harvest.
- The Michigan Snowfresh program ensures the highest-quality tree.
- Christmas trees must be dormant before harvest to maximize their needle holding.

say no?

In the heat of the summer, the Mathisen Tree Farm is bustling with activity, preparing for the November and December demand for Christmas

trees. Two-thirds of the farm's business is Christmas trees, with the remainder being nursery stock.

Growing a quality tree is as risky as any row crop, more so in some respects, Trechter says. "It's a long-term rotation, anywhere from seven to 15 years. There's a lot that can happen."

It all starts with knowing what each tree species requires in terms of soil types and nutrients, typography, and water, explains Andy Cole, who is co-owner with Trechter. Cole mainly handles agronomy, while Trechter tackles marketing and fieldwork.

Successful tree growing has never been that easy, but in recent years and with new technology, the process has gotten even more complicated — and more productive.

Precision growing

In 1998, a year after Cole and Trechter bought the farm, they started using GPS and variable-rate technology to divide an 80-acre parcel into 3-acre grids. An average of the soil analyses was used to better calculate the nutrient needs of each piece of ground. Today, Mathisen Tree Farm utilizes GPS satellite mapping to create 1.5-acre grids.

"We can more effectively adjust soil pH and nutrient levels to meet the varying needs," says Cole. "We're better stewards of the land, and it's more economical. We're putting the right nutrients where they are needed."

Mathisen Tree Farm also may be the

first tree farm to actively irrigate on a large scale, Trechter says. "The Fraser fir, which is very popular right now, is very demanding," he says. "It is site-specific and very sensitive to too much water or not enough. Irrigation helps stabilize the environment."

About 150,000 trees are started yearly in outside seedbeds. After two years, the seedlings are dug up and the best ones replanted, Cole explains. After two years, they are transported to the field.

Forecasting demand

Diversity and a long-term outlook are important in the tree industry. Consumer trends can change in a couple of years, making today's planting decision a very significant, educated guess.

Scotch pine was the favorite for many years, but "we live in a Fraser fir world now," Trechter adds.

Overproduction of Scotch pine in the Great Lakes region during the mid-1980s caused a glut. "Also at that time, consumers were discovering the attributes of Fraser fir, and the transformation began," Trechter says. "Consumer trends can change a lot quicker than the market can respond. Consumers have tired of the Scotch pine and want something with shorter needles, stiff branches, great fragrance and needle retention. That's a Fraser fir."

The saturation of Scotch pines prompted the need for creative marketing. Hence, the Michigan Snowfresh program and designation were born.



TOM TRECHTER stops by a field being irrigated. Certain species of trees need irrigation to create moisture stability.