Christmas is a year-long season for tree farmers

Christmas tree farming looks easy to those who haven’t tried it: Put the trees in the ground, then come back a few years later to harvest them and send them to market. The reality is that producing the perfect, cone-shaped trees that consumers demand once a year requires hard work almost every month of the year.

While they realize most of their income in the winter, it’s the summer months when Christmas tree farmers really earn their money. That’s the peak season for shaping trees. To a large extent, it’s the shape of the tree that determines whether or not it will be sold in December, says Daniel Cassens, Purdue professor of forestry, who also operates a medium-sized, choose-and-cut Christmas tree business.

However, summer isn’t the only busy season on the calendar. In March and April, tree farmers are busy planting new trees. Then, as soon as the grass and weeds begin to grow, the areas around the trees must be mowed. In late summer, some growers apply a green colorant to the trees.

For choose-and-cut operators, harvest begins when people come to cut the trees in the field, which is often the day after Thanksgiving. “The biggest weekend for sales is the first weekend in December. If people are going to put up a big tree, they come out and buy it early so they can enjoy it,” Cassens says.

Even after the holidays are over, a Christmas tree farmer can’t rest. January, February and March are the time for culling trees.

Christmas tree farming does make a good family business, says William Hoover, professor of forestry economics at Purdue, particularly with a farm near an urban center that can draw plenty of customers. “The best approach is to serve the local community with a choose-and-cut operation,” he says. “This also provides an opportunity to sell crafts, such as wreaths or garland.”

Did somebody say McDonald’s?

More than 70 students from Indiana pork-producing families were able to go ahead with their college plans this year, thanks in part to scholarships from McDonald’s Indiana restaurants.

The McDonald’s Scholarship Fund to Aid Indiana Pork Producers began last spring when Indiana restaurant owners approached Lt. Gov. Joe Kernan about helping farm families who were facing catastrophic pork prices. The Indiana restaurants launched a McRib sandwich promotion and funded the $1,500 scholarships with a portion of the proceeds. Twenty-eight of the 72 students who received scholarships chose Purdue’s School of Agriculture.

By Chris Sigurdson
Surfing for stocks

Purdue students are cashing in on a course that teaches them the ins and outs of investing, particularly online investing, at an early age.

The fact that students are both computer and market savvy is driving the trend in young would-be investors, says Sugato Chakravarty, an assistant professor of consumer sciences and retailing who teaches this personal finance course.

“Above all, I emphasize that you need to be an educated consumer,” Chakravarty says. “And that’s easier than ever if you know how to find reputable information on the Internet.”

Chakravarty is quick to warn his students and others not to try to compete with the online professional day traders who can still get in and out of a market faster than the average online investor.

“While the Internet has empowered the average investor, it’s also created a greater volatility in the market on a daily basis,” he says. “The potential pitfalls of online trading can come from false information or rumors in chat rooms or a temporary groundswell of excitement over a particular stock.”

Although many of the students don’t have the money to invest now, Chakravarty is preparing them for the future, so that once they have the resources to invest, they also have the knowledge to do so wisely.

By Kate Walker

Purdue on top after food fight

Purdue Agriculture students won a big food fight last summer—the Institute of Food Technologist’s 1999 Student Product Development Competition—with SOY-PRO, a high-protein, ready-to-eat cereal with soy ingredients.

Designed for health-conscious consumers, the students used soy as the base of their product because of the plant’s nutritional profile and potential health benefits, such as lowering cholesterol with regular consumption.

“We chose cereal as our product because the cereal industry needs innovation in order to recapture some of the breakfast food market that it has lost in recent years,” says team leader and food science graduate student John Gray. “We felt that a soy-based cereal would have a lot of market potential.”

By the Institute of Food Technologists

Picnics, Potlucks & Prizewinners—Celebrating Indiana hospitality with 4-H families and friends, a cookbook of recipes, is available from the Indiana 4-H Foundation. The cookbook contains more than 2,000 recipes, including many selected from State Fair entries. For more information, contact the Indiana 4-H Foundation, (317) 692-7044.
Help for hardwoods

The quality of hardwood trees throughout the Midwest should get a boost, thanks to research conducted at the Hardwood Tree Improvement and Regeneration Center (HTIRC) located at Purdue University.

"Over a period of time, harvesting practices have taken the best trees, leaving behind trees that don't have superior traits," says HTIRC director Charles Michler. Scientists hope to advance hardwood species through genetic improvement in characteristics such as growth rate, wood quality, disease resistance and herbicide tolerance. Improved seed stock and management technologies then will be made available to nurseries and woodlot managers.

"A 1 percent increase in annual red oak wood production in Indiana would increase harvest revenue by up to $5 million," Michler says.

Partners in the regional center include Purdue's Department of Forestry and Natural Resources, the U.S. Forest Service, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources and the forest industry.

Governors focus on 4-H

Indiana 4-Her and Purdue sophomore Bree Emsweller had the ears of our nation’s governors and told them, “4-H has shaped my personality more than anything else in my life.”

The importance of extra learning opportunities was on the agenda as governors gathered last summer in St. Louis for their annual meeting. Emsweller, who had just completed her 10th year in 4-H, and two students representing other organizations joined retired Army Gen. Colin L. Powell, chair of America’s Promise: The Alliance for Youth, to share the importance of learning outside the classroom.

“It was an amazing experience,” Emsweller says. “Fifty of the most powerful leaders in our country were there, and there I was, representing the largest youth organization in the nation—not just 4-Hers, but all the leaders, educators and volunteers.”

Though the spotlight was on the governors, Emsweller received her share of media attention, too. Her speech was carried live on C-SPAN, and she did several television interviews following her speech.

A soybean candle that began in a Purdue research lab soon will be on retail shelves across the nation. Agricultural engineering professor Bernie Tao’s research showed that candles made from soybeans burn cleaner than petroleum-based paraffin candles, leave no sooty residue and have a lower melting point. The Indiana Soybean Board debuted the farm-grown candles at the 1998 Farm Progress Show in Tipton, Ind. And at last summer’s State Fair, the board signed a contract with Altristra Consumer Products—the marketer of Ball canning jars—for worldwide distribution of the candles.
Purdue, IU partners in paralysis research

With a commitment of $1 million annually, Indiana is advancing paralysis research through a joint effort involving Purdue and Indiana universities.

The state money, split evenly between the two universities, supports the application of research on spinal cord and head injuries. The mission is to move promising experimental treatments into actual human clinical trials.

The arrangement is made possible through the Institute for Applied Neurology in Purdue’s School of Veterinary Medicine. Director Richard Borgens, a professor of developmental anatomy, says this formal arrangement with IU will help cut the time that it takes to test new research developments on humans. “In the past, we have had to apply for grants in order to fund human trials. That process can take two to three years or more. Now we’ll be able to move more quickly into human trials if a technique is both safe and effective on animal patients,” he says.

Dr. Paul Nelson, Betsey Barton Professor and chairman of the neurosurgery division at IU, called the pairing unique. “Most of these arrangements are between centers doing basic research,” he says. “We are already collaborating and very excited about utilizing Purdue’s veterinary school as a ‘first step’ in developing paralysis treatments.”

Spinal cord injuries represent a growing medical and financial dilemma for state governments, yet only a few other states—Kentucky, Florida and Virginia among them—fund paralysis research. States pay for the care of many paraplegics by way of Medicaid and disability payments.

Amy Cook Lurvey of Indianapolis, who has spent nearly 40 years lobbying Indiana state legislators on behalf of people with disabilities, says this landmark partnership will work to reduce the costs for the care of paraplegics and will improve their quality of life. “Purdue’s work in paralysis research is innovative and goes far beyond what is being done in other parts of the country,” she says.

By Beth Forbes

Vet Web

www.vet.purdue.edu

When Purdue’s School of Veterinary Medicine created its Web site in 1992, it became the first vet school in the United States to have a Web presence. Using information collected since the site debuted, the school recently redesigned its Web pages to make them even more user friendly.

“We collected a lot of information about who uses our Web site before we started the redesign,” says Webmaster Tim Nordland. “We discovered that we have a global audience, with 55 percent of the visitors coming from outside the United States. Keeping that in mind, we redesigned the school’s Web site to accommodate slow Internet connections and smaller computer screens.”

Although designed for speed, the site is not short on information. It offers some unique services, including a database of poisonous plants, information on the school’s research centers and veterinary technology courses online.

By Steve Tally