

Christmas tree farm a growing venture

■ Agreeable weather has brought large crowds to Town of Grafton nursery

By MARK JAEGER

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With mild temperatures and nary a snowflake in sight, it didn't feel much like December over the weekend at Trees for Less, 2321 E. River Rd., in the Town of Grafton.

Still, Christmas is just three weeks away, so the 100-acre property was crawling with families searching for the perfect tree to serve as the centerpiece of their holiday decorations.

It is the second year Lisa and Rick O'Malley have operated the cut-your-own tree farm, which boasts about 10,000 evergreens.

The trees take 10 to 12 years to mature to the size deemed ideal for in-home Christmas displays, so patience and vigilance are key elements to their successful business plan, Lisa O'Malley said.

While many families enjoy the exhilaration of hiking and finding their perfect tree, the Trees for Less operation is a far cry from sending folks out into an uncharted forest to cut down any specimen that meets their fancy.

Trees are lined up in neat rows according to variety — with Fraser fir, balsam fir, concolor fir, Scotch pine, white pine, white spruce and blue spruce available.

Of course, nature doesn't sort trees by species nor plant them in orderly rows.

"It is a lot of work to maintain a tree farm," said O'Malley, whose family has owned the rural Sandhill Farm since the 1960s.

"You have to fertilize and mulch the trees, keep them watered and trimmed. This year, we had to do what they call coning, removing the excess growth, twice on the Fraser firs."

The Scotch pines, white spruce and blue spruce are sold at a set price, but the firs are sold by the foot. Trees as tall as 13 feet are available.

No pre-cut trees are sold, ensuring that every tree sold is fresh.

An unusual seam of sandy soil on the property makes it one of the few places in southeastern Wisconsin where the finicky Fraser firs grow. The soil in the region is dominated by clay, according to O'Malley.

During the Christmas tree season, which this year at the farm runs on weekends from Nov. 21 to Dec. 20 this year, about a dozen young helpers — all wearing suitable holiday headgear — are on hand to bag trees and strap them to the roofs of family cars.

"We give families a saw and a tarp to drag the tree back, or they can pick out the tree they want and we'll send guys on a



CUT YOUR OWN is the rule of the day at Trees for Less in the Town of Grafton, but there is plenty of help available (top photo) for those who need help bringing home the perfect Christmas tree. At lower left, Jessica and Nate Olson prepared to cut down their selection. Trees on the lot are organized and labeled by species.

Photos by Mark Jaeger

four-wheeler to cut it and haul it," O'Malley said.

Adding to the festive atmosphere during the hours the lot is open, a firepit is maintained to warm chilled fingers.

If the chill is more than skin deep,

O'Malley offers a shot of Jameson Irish whiskey with each sale — often served under a sprig of mistletoe.

"I'll probably go through three or four liter bottles over the weekend," she said.

Hot chocolate is also available, as is live

music. Mike Gregory, a strolling banjo player, served his own playful rendition of Christmas songs over the weekend.

All of the elements make for a magical Christmas setting, but O'Malley said she is never tempted to lose sight of the serious side of the holiday trade.

"This is a business for me," she said.

"We'll probably sell about 3,000 trees in a good year. If business is really good and we sell all 10,000 trees, I wouldn't mind spending next Christmas somewhere warm."

Despite that all-business talk, O'Malley said the tree farm donated about 50 trees to families through Family Sharing of Ozaukee County.

"It is wonderful to see the eyes of the kids light up when we give them a tree they might not otherwise get," she said.

Saukville Chamber seeking new director

The Saukville Chamber of Commerce is seeking a new executive director to replace Sherri Yandry, who is stepping down after holding the position since January 2012.

Resumes and applications for the part-time position are being accepted through Tuesday, Dec. 15, and can be forwarded to Chamber President Chris King at chris.king@pwsb.com.

For more information, call King at (262) 235-9068.



A WHITEWASHED BARN on the Sandhill Farm property has been converted to Christmas central during the tree-cutting season. At right, Olivia Boyle of Mequon enjoyed a hot chocolate while visiting the tree farm with her family.

Photos by Mark Jaeger

