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Two workers tote a tall tree to a customer's car at Sugar Pines Sugar Pines Farm during peak Christmas tree season in Chester. For the past five years, the farm has been owned by the Neubauer family, who work year-round to grow the perfect Christmas trees.

Photographs by Peggy Turbett

Christmas tree people

Growing perfect holiday conifer takes tender loving care 12 months of year

By KRISTA S. KANO

From Thanksgiving to Christmas day, Sugar Pines Christmas tree farm just outside of Chardon is packed with people looking for the perfect holiday centerpiece. Some want small trees, but most are gunning for that perfectly full and fragrant 8-foot tree to place in their home. What they may not realize is that every 1 foot of height represents one year of growth, 12 months of careful planning, 365 days of tender care.

For the past five years, Sugar Pines has been owned by the Neubauer family, Fritz, 48; Jane 47; Fritz, 12 and Sam, 8. As a family, they work year-round, tending to the 25,000 trees that are growing on their Mulberry Road property.

"Running a Christmas tree farm requires a ton of work. Between planting and shearing and fertilizing it takes every month of the year to grow this many trees," Mr. Neubauer said. "Just like any type of farming, we're busy in the spring season. It doesn't matter what kind of farm you have."

"You're always dependent on mother nature," Mrs. Neubauer said. "There are all these



Julia Jaworski guides Dominic Zingales in the fine art of marshmallow roasting in the s'mores pit, one of the family-friendly winter activities at Sugar Pines Farm. Typically, Fritz, 12, and Sam, 8, stoke the fire and hand out marshmallows at the farm owned by their parents.

things you need to do but they have to be done when it's raining, or when it's not raining or when it's sunny or windy."

When the Neubauers bought the farm in August of 2012, it was still a functioning tree farm owned by Glen and Carol Battles. At the time, the Neubauers were living a few minutes down the road and saw that it was for sale.

"They were still growing trees but (Mr. Battles) was getting to a certain age and didn't want to run it as a Christmas tree farm. He was toying with the idea of developing the property, but we loved the idea of keeping it as a Christmas tree farm. We're tree people," Mr. Neubauer said.

The Neubauers described themselves as "outdoor people" who love to camp, fish, kayak, hike and rock climb and decided that this would be the perfect fit for their family. Mr. Neubauer, an arborist who has owned his own tree service for 25 years, and Mrs. Neubauer eventually negotiated the price and purchased the farm.

"It wasn't like a dentist stepping in to be a tree farmer," Mr. Neubauer said. Even with his expertise, there was a huge learning curve as the Neubauers had to learn special techniques to plant and care for conifers. Some of that was learned through the previous owners, but plenty of it was through trial and error.

Now in the fifth season, the family has become a well-oiled machine with Fritz and Sam helping out with planting and watering.

"Fritz was driving the tractor while we were trailing behind planting. This past summer we only got three good rains all summer, so there was a lot of watering to do and these guys helped out more than they wanted to," Mr. Neubauer said.

But sometimes with a lot of rain, comes a very strong growing season, which can also cause problems for tree farmers.

"If there's a heavy growing season, Firs will grow 20 to 24 inches and that's not desirable," Mr. Neubauer said. "People think 'What a great growing season,' but if it's too fast, the trees are too skinny and thin and then you have to cut the tops down."

And when that happens, it's the Neubauers, with some seasonal help, who are trimming each individual tree. Sometimes it's Fritz driving the tractor and other times is Mr. or Mrs. Neubauer with Sam steering while sitting on their laps.

"He's like a human sandbag," Mrs. Neubauer said and Sam quickly replies "You're a human sandbag!"

Throughout the year, and while Fritz and Sam aren't at school at Hershey Montessori, the family is planting seedlings, plowing their fields, churning the soil, fertilizing, and keep track of pest control.

Once November hits, they're preparing for opening day over Thanksgiving weekend. Fritz and Sam make ornaments out of wood, stoke the bonfire to make s'mores for guests and are the ultimate gofers.

During that time, all their hard work pays off with hundreds of families coming to them from as far as Florida to get their trees.

"It's a fun trip out to the country without having to drive too far," Mrs. Neubauer said. ■

Running Sugar Pines Farm is a family affair for the Neubauers: back row from left, Jane and Fritz Jr., and front row from left, Sam, 8 and Fritz III, 12.





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