

Focus on Christmas Trees

Profile of a Sustainable Christmas Tree Grower

Although Aubrey and Linda Raper moved to the mountains in Madison County, NC, to raise their children, they also quickly learned how to grow Christmas trees. They had no previous farm experience before growing burley tobacco, tomatoes and Christmas trees in 1977. From the beginning of their farming career, they were against the idea of using pesticides, both philosophically and pragmatically.

The Raper family saw firsthand the detrimental effects of pesticide use in Avery County. Avery County was the first county in North Carolina to grow Christmas trees. The growers in Avery County used large amounts of herbicides to kill the ground-cover beneath the trees which resulted in larvae in the soil feeding on the tree roots. The Rapers also realized that pesticides are expensive. Most Christmas tree growers use pesticides such as Round-Up and Di-Syston. The Extension Service in Madison County estimates that the herbicide Round-Up costs about \$15 per acre per year and the insecticide Di-Syston costs about \$3 per acre per year. Other pesticides may also be used by growers, but the amount and type varies by grower.

The Rapers have a 65 acre farm, three acres of which are set aside for growing Christmas Trees.

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Facts about Christmas Trees

- Before the 1950s, Christmas trees came primarily from the forest. Today about 98 percent of all trees in the US are grown on farms (*Tree Farming: Environmental Benefits*).
- Christmas trees are grown in all 50 states. The states that produce the most Christmas trees include Oregon, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, California and North Carolina (*Christmas Tree Facts: Fun Facts and Figures*).
- There are approximately one million acres of land in Christmas tree production in the US. There are about 15,000 Christmas tree growers and 100,000 workers (*Christmas Tree Facts: Fun Facts and Figures*).
- In 1996 there were 31 million Christmas trees sold nationwide (*Sales Figures: Fun Facts and Figures*).
- Sales of North Carolina Christmas trees totaled \$78 million in 1996. Trees accounted for \$72 million; wreathes, roping and greenery accounted for \$6 million (*1997 North Carolina Christmas Tree Survey*).
- There were 34.2 million Christmas trees on 23,530 acres of land in NC in 1997. Ashe County produces the most Christmas trees in North Carolina, accounting for 9.8 million Christmas Trees (*1997 North Carolina Christmas Tree Survey*).
- There are approximately 1,600 Christmas tree growers in NC. Two-thirds of growers have operations over ten acres in size. The average Christmas tree grower has three acres of land in Christmas tree production (*1997 North Carolina Christmas Tree Survey*).
- The largest 60 growers in NC have Christmas tree operations of 100 or more acres. They account for less than four percent of the growers, but they produce over 51 percent of the Christmas trees (*1997 North Carolina Christmas Tree Survey*).
- The smallest growers in NC have an average of three acres of Christmas trees. They account for over 66 percent of all growers and yet they only produce 10.7 percent of the Christmas trees (*1997 North Carolina Christmas Tree Survey*).

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