

When The Crop Is Evergreen

IT'S CHRISTMAS TIME ALL YEAR

photo-story by VICKI INNES
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Most people think about Christmas trees just once each year. They enjoy their evergreens for a few weeks in December before the trees are tossed out — to be forgotten for another year.

For a 24-year-old Burlington woman, however, Christmas trees are a year-round concern.

ELEANOR UNSWORTH, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Unsworth, is one of the few women — if not the only one — in Ontario who owns a tree farm.

On her 46-acre property at Kearney, just 20 miles northeast of Huntsville, she has gained first-hand knowledge of the work involved in growing trees.

Planting, pruning, spraying, marking and cutting one tree for use at Christmas is light enough work. Multiply this by 27,000, the number of trees on her farm, and it is a different story.

Miss Unsworth went to her farm recently to plant 500 white spruce seedlings acquired at the Forest Tree Park at Midhurst.

The warm sun glistened from

Preparing to plant, Miss Unsworth takes bunches of 25 seedlings from the larger bundle of 500 white spruce seedlings.

flaming autumn leaves nearby as she walked down the rows, digging holes for the young trees. Keeping an eye on the seedlings as they were each placed by a friend in a hole and then covered, she described her work.

"After the trees are planted — usually this is done in the Spring — they are left alone for about three years," she said.

Then, the hard work of pruning begins.

PRUNING, or clipping branches to control the shape is done once a year until the tree is the desired height for use at Christmas.

Six-months Job

This work keeps Eleanor busy for about six months of the year; Scotch pine have to be pruned in June and July while spruce and balsam can be pruned later in the fall.

"The worst part about pruning is probably the black flies," she said. When the flies are in season, she keeps well covered.

While some types of evergreens grow in an almost perfect symmetrical shape by themselves, most need a helping hand from a pair of clippers.

For example, Scotch pine, a tree with a needle about two inches long, would be useless as a Christmas tree without pruning, while white spruce and balsam, which both have a one-inch-long needle, need far less work.

The year the trees are to be sold, very little pruning is done as the action of pruning encourages growth. These trees are then marked with a piece of string for identification at cutting time, which starts as early as October.

And, deciding which trees should be cut, can be a problem.

"I've looked at so many trees, I can't tell what shape is best," Eleanor said with a twinkle in her deep blue eyes. Having never sold any trees, she is uncertain about public taste.

THIN ONES, thick ones, tall ones, little ones... which do people want?

Two years ago she helped a friend sell trees in a foreign section of Toronto.

"Almost everyone there wanted a spruce or balsam tree because those trees are used at Christmas in their native land," she said. "And all we had was pine."

The most popular Christmas



Walking along seemingly endless rows of trees, Miss Unsworth surveys the result of careful pruning. Christmas trees grow an average of one foot

a year, and must be pruned each year after the tree is three years old.

tree in this area, she believes, is Scotch pine with white spruce coming a close second. While it is largely a matter of personal preference, pine can be pruned to almost any shape and its needles last longer after cutting.

A FRIEND OF Eleanor's living in Burk's Falls noted the public was becoming more discriminating in its choice of trees.

"Ten years ago," he said, "you could sell anything. Now trees have to be properly pruned."

Trees are commonly sold in three ways: "On the stump" to a wholesaler who cuts and transports the trees; by the owner cutting his trees and delivering them either to a wholesaler or retailer; or by cutting, transporting and selling them himself.

Besides pruning, Eleanor also keeps an eye on possible diseases or bugs which might infect the trees.

Most serious problem is grosbeaks, a bird that eats buds. This however, may not be a problem every year.

A few trees are affected by the white pine weevil, an insect that burrows into the trunk of a tree and thus deforms it. Deer also spoil trees in winter by nibbling snow-covered branches.

Another unexpected problem

has been keeping goats and cows from nearby farms out of her garden and away from the trees. Once, goaded into action by the sight of cows on her land, she chased them with the aid of a large dog. The startled cows haven't been back since.

Eleanor has also quite accidentally, become involved in municipal affairs. For the past two years, snowplows have broken down trees along her lane. So she requested her township to pay the damage.

"**MY LANE** is in one township but it is the only access into the property of my neighbors, who are in the adjoining township," she said. Neither township wants to assume responsibility for the damage.

"I always thought a 'man's home was his castle — until now," she laughed.

Eleanor bought the property in 1958 after becoming interested in farming at the Ontario Agricultural College where

she studied horticulture for two years.

"I had lectures on forestry and I thought that would be a good way of farming without having to work too hard," she admitted with a rueful smile. "It certainly didn't turn out that way."

When she bought it, the farm had about 25,000 trees, up to three years old. Most are Scotch pine, with about 4,500 spruce and smaller numbers of red pine, white ash and white spruce. Poplar and birch trees grow wild. Besides their use as Christmas trees, some may be used for pulpwood, lumber, timber and hard wood products.

Following OAC, Eleanor attended Hamilton Teachers' College for a year. She then taught Grades five and six at the V. K. Memorial School, about eight miles south of Huntsville, so she would be close to her farm.

She has now left her job and lives with her parents when

she is not at her farm which boasts an old, two-storey frame house.

Does she get lonely there? "No, not really," she replied. "I have lots of friends up and they enjoy helping because it's so different for them here. And there's lots of work to be done on the house."

Although the top storey is in poor condition, she has made the first floor into comfortable living quarters. The house has no electricity or plumbing, but coal oil lamps and a wood stove give it a cheeful air at night.

Her enjoyment of working on her farm is obvious.

"In a lot of jobs, you don't see the results of your work," she said. "But here, I can see just what my work brings."

"Probably anyone who likes being out in the bush would enjoy it," she added.

"And besides... here, you get good healthy air into your lungs."



This tiny seedling, held by Miss Unsworth, may in five or six years hold the glow of Christmas in some Hamilton home.

