

# Many a Trick to Raising Christmas Trees

**By Michael Jacot**  
**In Imperial Oil Review**

To the average Canadian male the problem of the Christmas tree is a simple one-week proposition; how to make the thing stand up straight from December 24 until January 2.

But to Clarence Roper, a 59-year-old man in Whitby, Ont., Christmas trees are a hobby, a "pension plan", a delight and a headache from spring to fall. When Christmas comes this year, he can breathe with satisfaction for his first crop of trees will be decorating thousands of homes.

**In Business By Accident**

Roper got into the business (for Christmas tree growing is a major business) almost by accident. He planted his first 4,500 Scotch pines eight years ago, to prevent his father's unused farm from reverting to bush. He planted again each year. Almost before he knew it he had 80,000 — and one of Ontario's finest crops.

But it didn't come easily, for the

temperamental Christmas tree is one of agriculture's more difficult crops. Like several thousand other professional Canadian growers, Roper plowed, planted, pruned, shaped, sheared and sprayed; battled with insects and mice (mice destroyed 15,000 of his trees last winter by gnawing at the bark under the snow), weeded, watered and waited. Finally, after eight arduous years, the first stand of pine was ready for sale last August. By that time Roper was almost sorry to see the trees go.

**"Frustrated Farmer"**

"There's nothing I like better than to start at sun-up and to move in and out of the trees, pruning, shaping, weeding until sundown," he says. "Maybe it is the frustrated farmer in me."

Roper is not alone in his enthusiasm. Since World War II Canada's Christmas tree industry has become big business. In 1957, a record year, Canadian trees earned over \$9 million from a cut of 16.4 million trees—double the 1947 figure.

Large companies buy trees in Canada for export. Other large companies mostly in the U.S. collect, refrigerate and market the trees. The bulk of Canada's crop (12 million trees in 1957, for example) is exported. The U.S. takes over 90 per cent. of it but Canadian trees travel as far as Mexico, Venezuela, Panama, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Cuba.

**Integrated Industry**

From a simple corner lot operation, Christmas trees have evolved into an integrated industry with at least one active provincial association, a set of internationally accepted standards, an annual summer school sponsored by the Ontario government, special courses in pruning and shaping and a profit (in a good year) averaging 50 cents per tree.

"A grower near me planted 30,000 Scotch pines 10 years ago on a 1,600-acre farm," says Roper. "They grew straight as needles and bushy with beards and early in November, 1957, a man drove up in a big shiny Cadillac and offered him \$30,000 for the lot."

**Hidden Snags**

However, like most good things the industry is full of hidden snags for the unwary. To many beginners it looks like quick and easy money. Actually it calls for skill, hard work and a little luck. One southern Quebec farmer planted 5,000 balsam firs on 50 acres. After three years the trees were still only 18 inches high. "What's wrong?" he asked a fellow grower. The other scraped away the topsoil with his boot — and exposed solid rock.

An Ontario farmer crowded 1,000 seedlings into a small back lot. He was well on the way to growing 1,000 walking sticks until someone explained that Christmas trees need elbow room to develop bushy growth.

**Tree Fair Game**

Others plant correctly but leave the trees to the mercy of insects, deer, porcupines, drought, floods and bears. The Christmas tree, in fact, is fair game for just about every onslaught of nature.

Droughts can cause off-color foliage and needle drop. Hail, sleet, heavy snow and late spring frosts damage the branches. And to hosts of insects a Christmas tree is nothing less than delicious. The balsam needle midge, for example, likes balsam needles. The white-marked tussock caterpillar, which looks something like a tooth brush, is fond of fir. The spruce budworm, balsam woolly aphid, pine weevil, collar weevil, saw flies and assorted moths are also partial to various kinds of tree.

Sprays kill most insects but they are nevertheless on the increase. To make matters worse the bugs are beginning to think like people.

**Highways Menace**

"Superhighways could become a menace to growers," says H. R. Drysdale, secretary of the Yule Tree Farmers' Association of Ontario. "Insects can use them to eat their way across the country. They travel along the trees bordering the main roads from stand to stand."

Then, too, the grower is harassed by deer, squirrels, porcupine, mice and rabbits, all of whom consider Christmas trees a taste treat. And pests or not, the average grower has work enough just keeping his trees in shape. Topiary — the art of shaping trees — is a skill that pays off in cash at selling time. But the grower earns his money. It takes about one and a half minutes for an expert to prune one tree — and plantations growing 30,000 are not uncommon.

**Prune in Second Year**

Pruning begins in the second year and continues each year until cutting. The grower trims over-

**Supplied by Government**

At first glance the final price of a tree — in Canada anywhere from \$1 to \$5 — seems to bear no relation to its initial cost. The Ontario government, for instance, supplies growers with Scotch pine trees for \$14 a thousand. Other varieties — spruce or white and red pine — are \$4 cheaper and at one time the government gave the trees away. In some provinces, trees are harvested from Crown or private lands under permit.

"But," says Ontario secretary association secretary Drysdale, "it costs a grower at least 50 cents to bring each top grade tree to maturity."

**Invest \$6.600**

Anyone thinking of going into the Christmas tree business should first check his bank account. "If it is going to hurt you financially, stay out of it," says Drysdale. "A man planting 10,000 seedlings each year has invested \$6,600 before he has a crop for sale. This year I've seen several plantations in the fourth, fifth and sixth year of growth, all well pruned and cared for, abandoned because the cost was too great for the owner to meet."

The Canadian growers who successfully fight fire, drought, pests, underbrush and thieves and have the financial fortitude to weather the eight-year growing period can probably get 47 cents to \$160 per

tree from local agents who sell to firms with million dollar refrigeration warehouses in the United States. Buying early in September, these big operators keep the trees in perfect condition for Christmas. A farmer can sell to them "on the stump" or "cut". If he sells on the stump, the buying firm will cut and transport the crop. Trees are fed into special binding machines, stump first so that the branches fold upwards.

**Scotch Pine**

Clarence Roper's trees are Scotch pine, an exotic tree imported from Europe which thrives in poor sandy soils. It holds its needles well and is one of the most popular kinds in Ontario. Across Canada, balsam is still most popular for domestic use and export. Its needles have a pleasing smell and are less apt than other species to dry out indoors.

It is grown mostly in Quebec and the Maritimes. B.C.'s Douglas fir is a favorite in western Canada. It is symmetrical and has lasting needles, but cannot be grown successfully in the east. Canada also grows white, black, Norway and red spruce and red and Austrian pine.

## Collection of Antique Cards Includes Original From 1873

One day about twenty years ago a young concert singer was browsing through her grandmother's attic when she came upon a trunk full of Christmas cards.

As she went through the trunk and studied each card she became enchanted with the delicate paintings and the lovely verses. The shiny faced cherubs, the flowers, and the humorous animals seemed to tell of the great years of the past. And as she sat there she thought of the wonderful story the cards told and how she would like to share that tale with others.

**The Beginning**

That afternoon was the beginning of the now famous Dorothea Dix Lawrence Antique Christmas Card Collection. In recent years Miss Lawrence's hobby has brought her as much recognition in the collectors field as her original renditions of American folk songs have brought her on the stage. Today her collection of nearly 3,000 antique cards is believed to be the largest in the country and is called the most unique.

In the past years her cards have been pictured in Life, Esquire, and other leading magazines and have been on display in such places as the Newark Museum, Lord and Taylor, and Woodward and Lothrop. In 1942 the collection was used in a display by the Greeting Card Industry of the United States to honour Great Britain on the 100th anniversary of the printing of the first Christmas card.

**Lectures on Cards**

Miss Lawrence's lectures on her Christmas card collection, which average 50 a season, have taken her to all parts of the country. In these lectures she illustrates the rarest and best of her cards with colored slides and frequently adds colors to her talks by singing unknown Christmas songs of the United States.

The history of the development of Christmas greetings is portrayed accurately and vividly in the card collection. The first Christmas card ever made was designed, drawn, and painted in 1837 by Miss Lawrence's own great grandfather, Colonel Riger Sherman Dix. Many of the other hand painted cards in her collection were also made by members of her own family.

**An Original**

Another valuable item in the collection is the original of the first greeting card printed in the United States. In 1873 Louis Prang, a Boston lithographer, printed a card which had been painted in England by Mrs. E. O. Whitney for Charles Dickens. When Charles Dickens sent the card to Prang, the lithographer had replicas made for his relatives and friends. The first Christmas card to be printed in the world, however, appeared in England in 1842 and is in the British Museum.

Other art treasures in the collection include many of the Louis Prang prize winning cards. Prang, in 1890, started a series of competitions in order to stimulate interest in the printing card business. Through these competitions he encouraged artists from all over the world to submit their Christmas card ideas. Many of these original paintings and reproductions are in the collection.

**Not "Christmasy"**

Through the Lawrence collection one can see the change which has taken place in Christmas greetings through the years. The first cards in America, all hand painted, were decorated with flowers, birds, and cherubs. Silk fringed cards, done by Currier and Ives for the most part, were extremely popular in the 70's; these had brilliant flowers and scenes on them which were not "Christmasy" as we think of cards today. In the 80's the cards were mostly of scenes of rivers and mountains. The 90's saw draped female figures fortified with white doves and pots of madonna lilies. Comic cards, using elephants, cats, and funny little people, were prevalent all through the years in varying forms. Up until the 20th century religious subjects on cards were taboo, so it was not until the 1900's that these kind of cards appeared. Holly and snow scenes have, since the turn of the century, typified Christmas more than any other motif.

**Says Peace River Land of Promise For Good Farmers**

BERWYN, Alta. (CP)—Johnny Wild is typical of the adventurous, nomadic farmers of the old Canadian West.

Johnny, 81 years old, was born in southwestern Hungary and during his first 20 years learned a flour miller's trade. In 1898 crop failures threw Hungary into a famine and the family emigrated to the United States.

The 18-day journey was made on the freighter Algra, whose captain sounded "on deck" orders twice during the stormy voyage. When she docked at Philadelphia Johnny, who had been seasick most of the time, said the trees and flowers, and people bustling around with springtime enthusiasm, were "a wonderful sight after the sea."

He struck out for the farmland of Ohio and found top wages for farmhands were only about \$130 a year—"if you struck a good farm."

He married Mary Elwer at Elphos, Ohio, in 1903 and the couple saved their money until 1909, when they moved into the homesteading country of Saskatchewan.

"I never had a crop failure in 47 years," he remembers. "It was good land except for one thing. I had to dig 12 wells before striking water. Even then, it was so hard you couldn't lather soap in it."

Then in 1925, a respiratory ailment seized their son and the Wilds decided to move to Oregon in search of a better climate. The Saskatchewan farm was rented.

The family stayed in Oregon until 1928, when Johnny took a trip to the Peace River country in Alberta.

"Thousands of acres of rich, untouched farmland lay smiling in the sun beckoning to me," he reminisces. "I knew right then that this was the place to take off my shoes and settle down."

The Wilds bought a 1929 model auto and in 1930 bumped over unfinished highways from Oregon to a spot nine miles north of here.

He described the first winter as "long, hard and pitiless," in the log cabin.

"We had to hang horseblankets on the walls and keep the Quebec heater blushing to keep out the cold."

In the early 30's the Wilds gathered 300 logs on their 10 quarters of land and their lives as prosperous Peace country farmers had begun.

Last year blindness struck Johnny but an operation in Edmonton removed the cataracts from his eyes and "I was the happiest man alive."

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