

# Pines & Needles

Fall 2010  
Edition

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## Presidents Message

By Virginia Carroll

First of all, I want to thank vice president Steve Satterfield, our board, and our professional support folks from VDACS, our speakers and program personnel, and so many others who planned and worked so hard to put together our VCTGA 2010 Annual Meeting. Also, I want to extend my personal thank you to Jeff Miller for all the professional and personal help during the pre-convention planning period and on site at our meeting. I hope you, our membership, found the meeting to be worthwhile and informative.



For some of us we had just come from our National Christmas Tree Growers meeting in North Carolina. We were made aware that 2010 is the 500 Year anniversary of the First Decorated Tree. I encourage you to embrace the opportunity to celebrate this event. The first decorated tree is said to have been in Riga, Latvia in 1510. Use this as you are promoting your farms and products this season!

We were fortunate to be able to hear a wide range of speakers with both technical and practical tips for the production and marketing of our product. Waynesboro turned out to be a splendid location with easy access off I-64 and opportunity for a great Thursday night with tours of the Department of Forestry Augusta Nursery and Schreckhise Nursery. We were fortunate to such great hosts and thank the DOF for the work in setting up the evening and the Schreckhise family for the tour of their operation and for providing a perfect setting for the meal where we concluded the evening with some good Virginia barbecue. It was tremendous having State Forester Carl Garrison with us on site at the DOF nursery and to have Commissioner of Agriculture Matt Lohr with us at the Schreckhise nursery.

On Friday evening, our banquet took us to Waynesboro Country Club where we shared the evening with Jeff Ishee and his wife. Jeff is a true friend of agriculture and a great ambassador for the farming industry in Virginia through both on his radio and television broadcasts. It was at the banquet that we had opportunity to honor Jeff by recognizing him and presenting him an award. I was pleased to be personally presenting the award on your behalf and hope that we will continue to recognize those who help significantly in moving our association and industry forward. We were also able to recognize those in our industry who won our sate tree and wreathe contests. Saturday, Bill Francisco hosted us for our farm tour at Francisco Farms. Bill is a past VCTGA president and did a great job telling the story of his operation and also was instrumental in obtaining some great media coverage of our meeting.

During the course of the meeting you heard a lot about strategic planning and marketing. In 2010 we took steps in moving forward in both areas. In terms of strategic planning the board anticipates continuing to address the need to look realistically at where we are now while still keeping a watchful eye to the future with a proactive approach to what our association can do for its membership and for our industry. During the course of the meeting, you were also made aware of our application for a marketing grant. As you'll see elsewhere in this issue, we have been awarded the grant. We need to thank Danny Neal, Sue Bostic, and Jeff Miller in working so hard to prepare and submit our application for the grant and those who have already agreed to work on a Marketing Steering Task Force. It is our hope and expectation that the moneys and the opportunities afforded us through this grant will allow us, on a broad scale, to increase our exposure as a viable Virginia grown product and to better market our product by specifically targeting civic clubs and other organizations that sell Christmas trees.

Lastly, I want to encourage you to take the time and effort to do a little extra "marketing" for your own trees and for our industry. There's really no better spokesperson on the local level than the farmers that live, grow, and sell in their communities. There's been some concern over the dry conditions of the

*(Continued on page 4)*



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(Continued from page 3)

summer and how those impacts us long term in terms of supply. As we go into the 2010 selling season let's focus on the fact we have a quality product to sell. The rains of late September and early October should serve us well in terms of this year's crop and the public's perception of the growing conditions leading up to the Christmas buying season.

There're many good things going on within our organization and our industry. Take advantage of them and be a significant partner in growing our industry. If you haven't expressed interest in sharing more fully in the work of VCTGA and



want to do so, please take the initiative and contact me, Jeff Miller, or any board member to become a more involved part of VCTGA.



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## Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 Wholesale Price List for Quality Seedlings & Transplants

Age	Size	Per 100 Rate	Per 1,000 Rate	Age	Size	Per 100 Rate	Per 1,000 Rate	Age	Size	Per 100 Rate	Per 1,000 Rate
<b>FRASER FIR</b>				<b>WHITE SPRUCE - Lake States</b>				<b>WHITE PINE - Lake States</b>			
(3-0)	6-12"	\$45.00	\$225.00	(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$40.00	\$175.00	(2-0)	4-8"	\$35.00	\$150.00
(2-2, PL+2)	8-15"	\$100.00	\$725.00	(2-1, 2-2)	15-20"	\$90.00	\$595.00	(2-0, 3-0)	5-12"	\$40.00	\$175.00
(3-2, PL+2)	10-18"	\$110.00	\$750.00	(2-2)	15-24"	\$110.00	\$750.00	(3-0)	8-15"	\$45.00	\$225.00
(P+3)	12-22"	\$125.00	\$850.00	(X-LG)	20-30"	\$250.00	\$1,600.00	(2-1)	8-14"	\$82.00	\$550.00
<b>BALSAM FIR</b>				<b>NORWAY SPRUCE - Lake States</b>				(2-2)	12-18"	\$110.00	\$750.00
(2-0)	5-10"	\$40.00	\$195.00	(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$40.00	\$175.00	(X-LG)	18-24"	\$250.00	\$1,600.00
(P+1)	8-14"	\$86.00	\$575.00	(2-1, 2-2)	15-24"	\$90.00	\$650.00	<b>SCOTCH PINE - Scotchhighland + French</b>			
(P+2)	10-18"	\$110.00	\$750.00	(X-LG)	20-30"	\$250.00	\$1,600.00	(2-0)	6-12"	\$35.00	\$165.00
<b>CANAAN FIR</b>				<b>BLACKHILL SPRUCE</b>				(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$40.00	\$175.00
(P+1)	8-14"	\$90.00	\$595.00	(2-0)	5-12"	\$40.00	\$175.00	<b>WHITE CEDAR</b>			
(P+2)	10-18"	\$115.00	\$795.00	(2-1)	8-14"	\$75.00	\$495.00	(2-0)	4-8"	\$40.00	\$195.00
<b>DOUGLAS FIR - Lincoln</b>				(2-2)	8-15"	\$95.00	\$695.00	(3-0)	8-15"	\$45.00	\$225.00
(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$40.00	\$175.00	(2-2)	12-18"	\$110.00	\$750.00	(2-1)	8-14"	\$82.00	\$550.00
(2-1)	12-18"	\$86.00	\$575.00	<b>SERBIAN SPRUCE</b>				(2-2, P+2)	12-18"	\$110.00	\$750.00
<b>CONCOLOR FIR</b>				(2-0)	8-14"	\$45.00	\$225.00	<b>ARBORVITAE - DARK GREEN, TECHNY, EMERALD &amp; GREEN GIANT</b>			
(2-0)	5-12"	\$45.00	\$225.00	(2-1, P+1)	8-14"	\$90.00	\$595.00	(RC+1)	6-12"	\$110.00	\$750.00
(2-1, P+1)	8-14"	\$90.00	\$595.00	(2-2, P+2)	12-18"	\$115.00	\$795.00	(RC+2)	12-18"	\$140.00	\$950.00
(2-2, P+2)	12-18"	\$115.00	\$795.00	<b>AUSTRIAN PINE</b>							
<b>COLORADO BLUE SPRUCE - San Juan &amp; Kiebab</b>				(2-0)	5-12"	\$40.00	\$175.00				
(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$40.00	\$175.00	(1-2)	12-18"	\$115.00	\$795.00				
(2-1, 2-2)	10-16"	\$75.00	\$495.00	<b>RED PINE - Lake States</b>							
(2-2, P+2)	10-18"	\$110.00	\$750.00	(2-0)	4-8"	\$35.00	\$150.00				
(X-LG)	15-24"	\$250.00	\$1,600.00	(2-0, 3-0)	5-12"	\$40.00	\$175.00				

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## Trees For Troops 2010

By John Carroll

The Christmas Spirit Foundation and the National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA) will again sponsor the very successful Tree For Troops Program. FedEx will be providing the trucking and air transportation again this year at no cost, which is a tremendous contribution. You are invited to participate by contributing good quality fresh trees, financial support through the Christmas Spirit Foundation, and by urging your customers to support the program.



Last year the program provided 16,651 Christmas trees to military families of which 2,500 were purchased by customers, or about 15% of the total. Last year Virginia donated 1239 trees to various branches of the military around the country. These were loaded at four pickup points and two trailer drop locations. News media coverage was excellent, especially for the trees going to Fort Hood in Texas. NCTA reports Nielsen Audience statistics show 27 million viewers see Trees for Troops stories each year, 15 million households actually recall seeing the stories and 1.2 million viewers say the program made them more likely to buy a real tree. I think we can all agree that the program is not only the right thing to do, by supplying fresh Christmas trees to those that risk their lives to defend our freedom, but it also is a very positive event for our industry.

We will again have four pickup locations and the trees will be loaded around the end of November or very early December. The following growers have graciously agreed to sponsor the pickup locations again this year. They will have details concerning tree quality, size and species needed. Please contact them if you'd like to participate.

Harrisonburg/ Luray: Dave Thomas  
dlthomas@shentel.net

Radford: Greg Miller  
gwmiller50@aol.com

Whitetop: Jackie Davis  
jackiedavis@dmme.virginia.gov

Mineral: John Carroll  
claybrookefarm@verizon.net

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## VCTGA Receives Grant for Marketing Expansion Initiative Promoting Virginia Grown Christmas Trees

The VCTGA has received a competitive specialty crop marketing grant through the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for \$30,000 to be used over the next 2 years. The grant was written and submitted by Sue Bostic, Danny Neel and Jeff Miller.

### Project Purpose:

The Virginia Christmas Tree Growers Association (VCTGA) is an organization with over 100 members. Member's farm size ranges from small choose and cut growers to large wholesale growers located in all 6 regions of Virginia. The VCTGA is seeking to take a stronger proactive approach toward improving the sale of Virginia Grown Christmas trees through increased brand awareness of Virginia Grown Christmas trees as a vital part of the "Virginia Grown" family of agricultural products. Greater identification within this very successful program will increase visibility for Virginia Christmas trees as a viable specialty crop produced and marketed throughout the state. The VCTGA is also seeking to better connect tree growers with a greater number of potential buyers by focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on civic, community, and non-profit organizations and groups. This goal will help in the sale of Virginia Christmas trees by establishing greater visibility and marketing opportunities for its growers within the Commonwealth by creating viable marketing outlets and successful working relationships. Through this proposal we will offer assistance to **ALL** Virginia Christmas tree growers, regardless if they are members or not, because our main objective is to benefit the entire Christmas tree industry throughout the Commonwealth. Our goal is, quite simply to further the marketing potential of Virginia Christmas trees and to increase and foster relationships with many of Virginia's non-profit and civic organizations. Various ideas have been generated within the VCTGA to meet these goals and objectives, but due to lack of funding have seen a shortfall in implementation. The VCTGA would like to implement project **Marketing Expansion Initiative Promoting Virginia Grown Christmas Trees** by having grower/buyer marketing expos throughout the state bringing growers and buyers face to face and also educate Christmas tree growers and buyers on how to utilize the "Virginia Grown" products available through the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Virginia Christmas tree growers across the state are experiencing a steady decline in sales that is leaving quality trees standing in the fields after Christmas. Far too many of the Christmas trees purchased in Virginia are bought from sources outside of the state and marketing efforts must be implemented to change this trend and increase overall competitiveness in the market. If we can narrow the gap between our growers and Virginia buyers it would increase overall sales and ensure that Virginia consumers are getting the freshest tree possible from a local grower. Along with bringing the buyers to the table we need to educate them on the use of renewable and sustainable resources. Public appreciation and brand awareness of locally grown and produced products are among the biggest benefits we have as tree growers.

Christmas trees are an important part of Virginia's agriculture industry, contributing more than \$35 million to the Commonwealth's total sales. The size of Christmas tree farms ranges from less than an acre to as large as several hundred acres, with a few growers having a thousand or more acres. With figures like these, it is imperative that individual tree growers have the proper name brand recognition, and a connection to the "Virginia Grown" campaign, to increase product visibility and marketing recognition, as well as, an adequate structure available to help in promoting the sale of this seasonal specialty crop.

As aforementioned, the association needs to refocus in order to gain more support from buyers within our home state. At the same time, we need to work harder to establish a greater competitive edge for our Christmas tree growers. A marketing expo in each region would allow local civic and non-profit groups to meet local Christmas tree growers and will help producers to better connect and understand customer needs and future trends in order to secure the financial stability of the Virginia Christmas tree growers.

## THE 2010 VCTGA ANNUAL MEETING: SOME IMPRESSIONS

By Steve Rhoades

Jeanie Francis was trying to get several members to write articles for **Pines and Needles** about their experience at the 2010 annual meeting of the VCTGA in Waynesboro. When I received an e-mail from Jeanie, obviously, I agreed to help. I won't attempt to provide a systematic summary of the activities and presentations at the meeting. Instead, I'd like to offer some of my impressions about the meeting.

Sharon and I enjoyed the annual meeting very much and found it to be quite informative, as has been our experience with all of the meetings we have attended since 1998, our first year as members. This may have been the nicest weather we have ever had for our annual meeting; it is often hot as the dickens. I was quite satisfied with the accommodations and thought the banquet facilities and food were probably the nicest that I can recall. The visits to the VA Department of Forestry facility and Bill Francisco's farm were both interesting and informative. The wagon tour and dinner at a local nursery provided a very nice end to the first day. As is typically the case, there were a lot of really good presentations on a diversity of topics, from farm safety and marketing to harmful Christmas tree insects and pathogens. It seems to me that the business meeting was relatively informative regarding the issues with which the officers and board of directors are dealing. It was good to see an effort at the business meeting to get some input and involvement in the Association's work from the membership. Finally, it was really enjoyable to see and talk with a lot of other growers we have come to know over the years. An added benefit is that we invariably learn and get good ideas from other growers, both experienced and new ones.

One of the impressions that I have from this meeting is that there seemed to be quite a few new, or relatively new, members in attendance. I really liked to see that. While these new folks may lack tree-growing and wreath-making experience, they may bring enthusiasm, new ideas, and some particular talents or expertise that could prove to be very useful to the VCTGA. It was especially nice to see that Ray and Page Scott's granddaughter and her husband filled in for Ray and Page, who

couldn't make it to the meeting this year. It was nice to see that this year "newbie" Fred Shorey and his wife were *both* able to make it to the meeting. Also notable was that one of our newest members, Christian Critzer, entered very impressive decorated and undecorated wreaths in the wreath competition. It would be nice to see such entries from more of the newer members who would not only get some wreath-making experience, but they could also get a personal critique of their work by one of the really good wreath makers we have in the Association. They might even earn a ribbon that they could take home and hang up for their customers to see.

I think that the VCTGA and all of its members can really benefit from new members despite their lack of experience, especially if they actively participate in one way or another. Since I'm on the new member bandwagon, I'd like to encourage all new members to be willing to serve on the board of directors. Much of what the officers and directors do for the Association has nothing directly to do with growing trees or making wreaths, so your lack of experience in these areas really doesn't make much difference. You are perfectly capable of providing useful ideas regarding such matters as where to hold the next annual meeting, what topics we should try to cover at the meeting, how to attract more new members, how we can keep our expenses down but continue to provide a quality product for the membership, and so forth. When I was on the Board as a relatively new Association member, I was asked to undertake a thorough review of the VCTGA constitution and bylaws. Obviously, my lack of experience as a grower did not prevent me from doing that task or giving my views on the kinds of matters noted above; and that is true of most of the duties of directors.

Finally, I want to thank the many people who helped to make the 2010 VCTGA annual meeting one of the best ever, and I'm sure other members join me in this message. I will generally avoid mentioning specific individuals who contributed to making this meeting such a success, because I'm sure that I would miss someone who deserves to be mentioned. That said, I would like to mention

some of the contributions that were important in making the meeting so worthwhile to me. The main exception to my "no-name" rule is that I must single out Steve Satterfield, who, because he is vice president, had primary responsibility for the big job of organizing the meeting. Of course, Steve would be the first to tell you that he had a lot of support from VCTGA President Virginia Carroll (along with her lovely assistant, husband John Carroll) and others. (Yeah, I know, I already broke my no-name rule again.) In addition to these folks, thanks go out to the many people who were active participants at the meeting. This includes those involved with the various presentations, the farm tour, the auction, and the wreath-making workshop.

Thanks must certainly go out to a number of state government employees from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), the Cooperative Extension Service, VA Tech, and the Department of Forestry. They brought a lot of energy and expertise to various presentations, the farm tour, the auction, and discussions with individual members. Make no mistake, the annual meeting and the VCTGA would be severely lacking without the active involvement of these very competent and dedicated state government employees. It should be remembered that they help us throughout the year by participating in our board meetings; responding promptly to queries from members on numerous topics; participating in VCTGA workshops; providing us with technical analyses of our soil, tree insect problems, and tree pathogens; participating in VCTGA workshops; and so forth. Our vendors certainly deserve a big thanks for their active support of the VCTGA through their membership, knowledge, contributions to our auction, providing us with information and products we need to run our operations, and some of them support our newsletter, **Pines and Needles**, by advertising there.

A number of members helped make this meeting a success on an informal basis. These include, for example, those who brought wreath tables for the wreath-making session, contributed items for the auction, and brought trees and wreaths for the competition. The tree and wreath competition naturally brings me to G. M., who once again served to oversee the judging of the trees and wreaths. (Note, I did not exactly reveal the name.)

While not directly connected with the annual meeting, a big thank you goes out to two people ( T. and D. O'-- again, sort of sticking with my policy of no names), who have for many years held an annual new growers' workshop at their farm and selflessly advised many of these new growers on a one-on-one basis throughout the year. Their efforts have resulted in quite a few new members for the VCTGA over the years. Finally, a thank you goes out to all of you members who were able to attend the meeting. It wouldn't be much of a meeting if nobody came would it?!

At this 2010 annual meeting, I was again impressed with the continuing vitality and usefulness of the VCTGA. This is entirely the result of efforts by individual members who took on formal responsibilities as officers and directors, or helped out with specific tasks on an informal basis. Having been the board member responsible for coming up with a slate of candidates to serve as officers and directors during my time on the board, I can tell you that it is not easy to come up with candidates. So, I urge all members to keep in mind how important it is to get active participation from the membership if we are going to continue to have a high quality association characterized by the vitality and usefulness so evident at the 2010 annual meeting in Waynesboro.

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Norway Spruce	2-1	Transplants	14-18"	\$84.60	\$530.00
White Pine	2-2	Transplants	12-18"	\$112.00	\$700.00
Leyland Cypress	RC+1	Transplants	8-14"	\$132.00	\$825.00
Serbian Spruce	2-1	Transplants	9-15"	\$92.00	\$575.00
Canadian Hemlock	P+2	Transplants	12-18"	\$118.00	\$740.00
Korean Fir	P+3	Transplants	12 - 24"	\$144.00	\$900.00

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## Christmas Tree Management Short Course Scheduled

Dr. Ricky M. Bates

Associate Professor of Horticulture Department of Horticulture, Penn State

Penn State's 2011 Christmas Tree Management Short Course will be held at the Ramada Inn and Conference Center in State College, PA, Wednesday February 16 and Thursday February 17. Sponsored by the College of Agricultural Sciences and the Department of Horticulture, the course attracts Christmas tree growers from over 12 states and Canada.

The course is designed to help growers adopt the latest pest control, production and business management practices. Core and Category pesticide re-certification credits from the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture will be available to those attending the meeting. This year's program represents a broad range of topics and highlights Christmas tree cultural management, pest control, and farm business management.

A sampling of this year's speakers and topics include:

- Larry Kuhns (Penn State Univ.) – Everything you need to know about B & B
- Paul Shealer (Penn State Univ.) – Back-to-Basics workshop
- Tracey Olson, Cathy Thomas, Sarah Pickle, Sandy Gardosik, Rayanne Lehman (PA Dept. of Agric.) – Hands-on pest management sessions
- Rick Bates (Penn State Univ.) – Grower-based tree improvement
- Bill Riden (Penn State Univ.) – Improving pesticide handling practices
- Tracey Harpster (Penn State Univ.) – Pesticide safety
- Rick Stehouwer & Andy Beck (Penn State) – Christmas tree soils
- Dwight Lingenfelter – Spray nozzle technology
- Mike Jacobsen (Penn State Univ.) – Christmas tree farm taxes

Grower panel – Labor issues

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A registration fee of \$185 includes all educational sessions, instructional materials, breaks and lunches for Feb 16 and 17. Registration for one day is \$105. A complete agenda and registration forms will be mailed shortly after Christmas. Registration deadline is Friday, Feb. 11, 2011. If you do not receive a registration form or need additional information, please call the Christmas Tree Management Short Course office at (814) 863-7713 or e-mail Rick Bates at rmb30@psu.edu. A block of rooms have been reserved at The Ramada Inn and Conference Center at a special rate of \$62. Reserve a room at a by calling (814) 238-3001, and indicate you are attending the Christmas Tree Short Course, or visit the Ramada's website at: [www.ramadasc.com](http://www.ramadasc.com). Room reservations should be made by January 14, 2011 to receive the reduced rate.

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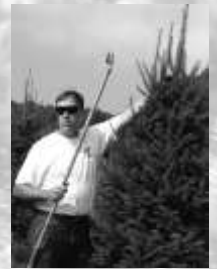
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# Waynesboro VCTGA Annual Conference August 26-28, 2010





## 2010 VCTGA Christmas Tree and Wreath Contest Winners



Joe Freeman's  
Grand Champion  
Fraser Fir

### Fraser Fir

- 1st Joe Freeman
- 2nd Sue Bostic
- 3rd Billy Cornette

### White Pine

- 1st Sue Bostic
- 2nd John Carroll

### Undecorated Wreath

- 1st Sue Bostic
- 2nd Christian Critzer

### Decorated Wreath

- 1st Sue Bostic
- 2nd Christian Critzer



Sue Bostic's  
Grand Champion  
Wreath

# 2010 Annual Meeting Survey

By Steve Satterfield

The Board of the Virginia Christmas Tree Growers Association (VCTGA) and others put considerable time and effort into planning the annual meeting. The annual meeting is the best opportunity for members to participate in their organization and to interact with each other. Certainly, we all have many common issues and concerns. The Board strives to make the annual meeting valuable to members.

To help assure that we are on the right track, a questionnaire was included in the registration packet for the recent meeting to get feedback from attendees. Seventeen questionnaires were returned. A total of 43 farms were registered for the meeting.

The questionnaire had 3 parts. The first part dealt with program content. The second part dealt with location, facilities, costs and length of meeting. The third part dealt with subjects for future meetings and whether the Saturday field trip was important. Overall, the feedback indicated a very high degree of satisfaction with all aspects of the annual meeting. That feedback confirmed the general impression from observing the meeting: attendees seemed to be engaged, interested and enthusiastic.

The question on program content sought to get feedback on the mix between production and marketing subjects. All responses but two simply said that the meeting had the right content and priorities. Two responses went further. One cautioned against adding any additional marketing and one viewed a presentation about the elements of one very successful operation as too promotional. Other comments singled out that particular presentation as one of the highlights of the meeting. So we do not always agree on everything.

The respondents were similarly positive on the meeting location, adequacy of facilities, costs and length of meeting. Fourteen out of the 17 responses were totally favorable. One comment said it was the best facility for the annual meeting that they had stayed in. One thought the cost was a "little high" and one thought the facility "too modest". One would have liked a restaurant on site but did note that restaurants were nearby.

With regard to future meetings, there were several suggestions in no particular order: meeting is useful for pesticide application license re-certification; continue marketing techniques and insect and disease control presentations; might need beginner and intermediate tracks for social media; include organic/natural pest and weed control; developing a list serve; and more on business structure and advantages and disadvantages. Another member said they would submit additional comments later so we look forward to receiving those.

One member suggested that the Board work to increase the visibility of the VCTGA annual meeting. Decorations and signage were suggested. We will definitely address that issue next year.

*(Continued on page 19)*



## A GOOD CHRISTMAS TREE IN 2008 IS NOT SO GOOD IN 2009: WHAT'S GOING ON? By Steve Rhoades

Sharon and I had a Murray cypress for our own Christmas tree in 2008 and again in 2009. The very different performance of these two trees, one good and one not, was a big surprise to us and not readily explicable. This experience and what we learned from it might interest some other VCTGA members, especially those who are growing, or thinking about growing, Murray or Leyland cypress.

We had never had a cypress for a Christmas tree prior to 2007. Therefore, when the Blue Ice and Murray cypress trees we were growing became large enough to use as Christmas trees, we wanted to try these trees in our own house. This way we would be able to tell our customers how they might expect the cypress to perform based on our own experience, not just from what we had read or heard about these trees. As I described in an earlier issue of *Pines and Needles* (spring 2008), we had a great experience with a Blue Ice cypress during Christmas of 2007. The tree held ornaments and lights nicely, it had a relatively strong and persistent aroma, and it held up beautifully for about five weeks in the house. So, our first experience with a cypress, a Blue Ice, was very good.

We tried a Murray cypress in both 2008 and 2009. Our excellent experience with a Murray cypress in 2008 convinced us that we could confidently recommend one to our customers as a tree that would hold up well for four to five weeks if given proper care. (To encourage proper care, we give all customers a flyer describing how to care for their trees, as well as their wreaths and table arrangements.) It was purely by chance that we had a Murray cypress the following Christmas (2009), because we had already tried one out for ourselves. We used one again simply because we had a nice looking, seven-foot Murray out in the field, but it had a very crooked trunk up to about a foot from the ground and had been passed over by customers. So, we decided to go ahead and use it ourselves. Our experience with this 2009 tree was markedly different from our experience with the 2008 Murray cypress.

The 2008 tree took up about two gallons of water during the first two or three days in the house be-

fore water uptake gradually tapered off. After five weeks in the house, the tree still looked fresh and very few scales broke off when I removed the tree from the house. In contrast, the 2009 tree took up virtually no water from the time it was brought into the house until it was removed from the house five weeks later. By the time the tree was removed from the house, the scales looked droopy and dried out, and quite a few of the scales broke off during removal.

It was not immediately clear why we had such different experiences with the two Murray cypresses. The two trees were cut and maintained in essentially the same manner. Both were cut from the same field comprised of a heavy, silty loam soil, and both were about seven feet tall. They were both taken to the house and immediately placed in a large stand with water where they remained for about five weeks. The trees were kept in exactly



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the same location in the house, and temperatures in the house were the same during the 2008 and 2009 Christmas seasons. I just didn't understand what was responsible for the tremendous difference in performance of the two trees.

I tried to come up with some other explanation (besides field location and soil) for the disparate performance of the two trees. I briefly considered "genetic variation" as the culprit because that is what we are often (and very possibly correctly) told by various technical experts on Christmas trees when they are not able to come up with a diagnosis for some problem with an individual tree or a small number of trees. However, it seemed that I had to rule out genetic variation as an explanation because, as I understand it, Murray cypresses are clones and would all have the same genetic makeup. So, I came up with another hypothesis that is logical, but I was not sure it was firmly grounded in plant behavior. We had a very wet late fall in 2009, right up to the time of cutting the tree. When I cut the tree, I imagine that it was totally saturated with water. Thus, when I placed

the tree in water just 20 minutes after cutting it down, the tree had no water deficit and did not take up any water. By the time the tree dried out enough to need some water, the sap in the tree had sealed off the vascular system where the tree was cut, and it could not take up any water. Of course, this hypothesis about our 2009 Murray cypress to take up water would seem to imply (maybe unrealistically) that most choose-and-cut trees are suffering a water deficit at the time they are removed from the field (otherwise, most such trees would not take up any water, and that is not the case). This possible explanation seemed suspect to me.

At this point, I was not satisfied with my efforts to understand the difference in performance between my 2008 and 2009 Christmas trees, so I decided to turn to an expert for help. I contacted Professor Eric Hinesley at North Carolina State University. As you will probably recall, Professor Hinesley made a very interesting and informative presentation based on his research into the post-harvest performance of Christmas trees at the annual meeting of the VCTGA last August, in Blacksburg, VA. One of the things that made me think about Professor Hinesley was that he had mentioned that his research found that cypress trees rehydrate to a greater extent than other species he tested. In any event, I sent an e-mail to him explaining the situation and offering my hypothesis (amateur stab at an explanation) for the difference I had observed.

Professor Hinesley kindly responded very promptly to my e-mail and was refreshingly candid about his uncertainty regarding the performance difference between my two trees. He noted that he hears a similar story at least once a year, but that he has never had it happen with any trees he has used in experiments or in his own home. He further noted specifically in reference to Leyland cypress (a very close relative of the Murray cypress) that they usually perform like my 2008 tree; holding up for a long time when placed in water immediately after cutting. He added that while he could not refute my hypothesis about pre-harvest moisture content preventing the uptake of water from the stand, he felt that this would not be sufficient to explain the performance difference that I experienced with my trees. (This might have been

(Continued on page 21)

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## Jeff Ishee 2010 VCTGA Friend of the Industry

Jeff Ishee was recognized as the 2010 VCTGA "Friend of the Industry" at the annual VCTGA banquet at the Waynesboro Country Club on August 27. The award was presented in recognition of his support of the Virginia Grown Christmas trees and the larger agricultural community. Last fall he did a segment on his show *On the Farm*, a daily syndicated regional radio news program and *Virginia Farming*, a weekly production of Virginia Public Television, interviewing VCTGA President Virginia Carroll and Rodney Richardson, who provided the Christmas trees for the Governor's mansion. Jeff Ishee has been recognized by many agriculture groups for his work. He was recently named the State Friend of Extension and Tom Stanley, Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources agent in Augusta County, says, "Jeff has been instrumental in helping the general public, many of whom have limited knowledge about agriculture, understand the challenges and accomplishments of the agriculture industry."



VCTGA President Virginia Carroll (right) presents Jeff Ishee with the VCTGA Friend of the Industry award

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(Continued from page 14)

The Board is already working on next year's meeting, tentatively slated to be in Blacksburg. All these suggestions and others as they are received along with thoughts of the Board will be considered for next year's meeting.

Attendees judged this year's meeting to be very worthwhile. That is gratifying as that is the intent. Work will continue to improve the meeting wherever possible to best serve the membership. The feedback provided by attendees is highly valuable and is greatly appreciated. The Board seeks the continuing advice of the membership.

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a kind and scientific way of saying that my hypothesis was a bunch of malarkey.) Professor Hinesley did go on to suggest how I might test the hypothesis.

The information I received from Professor Hinesley is encouraging to me and Sharon in that it strongly suggests that the poor-performing 2009 Murray cypress is an anomaly. We're really glad to hear this, because our 2008 tree was really nice, quite a few of our customers like the tree, and we are growing quite a few of them. At this time, we still feel that we can confidently, but now tinged with a bit of uncertainty, recommend Murray cypress to our customers. I must confess that I am strongly tempted to try another Murray cypress for our own Christmas tree next year. In any event, assuming my 2009 tree was an odd-ball, I wonder why it became an odd-ball. Perhaps there is a genetic explanation that does not depend on genetic variation, which I don't think can apply to clones such as Murray cypress. This alternative genetic hypothesis is that somehow the 2009 tree had gene damage or a gene mutation, but I don't know whether this is a plausible hypothesis. I guess I'll need help from a plant biologist on this one.

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