**Christmas tree business growing**

By CYNDY FALGOUT
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Raising Christmas trees seemed a logical venture for Barton Bennett, a forester and president of a forestry consulting firm.

Bennett and his wife, Andrea, owners of the Christmas Forest in Zachary, began growing Christmas trees in 1978 after learning about the state's emerging Christmas tree industry from researchers at LSU, Bennett said recently.

For the Reginald H. Pulliam family, Christmas tree farming is "a hobby that turned into a business with us," said Donna Deville, Pulliam's daughter.

"We read an article in a Sunday Advocate about Christmas trees and how the industry was starting in Louisiana," Deville said.

"That was in 1977."

One year later, the family planted the first seedlings for what has become Kringlewood Christmas Tree Farm in Zachary, Deville said.

Harold Mire, owner of Cornerview Christmas Tree Farm in Gonzales, said the idea of raising Christmas trees arose in 1983 when he was searching for a new crop to plant on family farm land he inherited.

Growing Christmas trees "seemed like an interesting thing to do," Mire said.

"This family has been in farming all our life," Mire said. The family "used to raise...

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Lacey Tynes, age 8, (left) searches for a Christmas tree with her grandmother, Mabel Hudgins, her mother, Tammi Tynes (right) and her sister, Lindsey Tynes, age 4, at the Christmas Forest in Zachary.

Herbert Hollins Jr., left, flocks a Virginia Pine at the Christmas Forest tree farm in Zachary. Tami Tynes, above, helps her youngest daughter Lindsey, age 4, cut a six-foot Virginia Pine held by her daughter Lacey Tynes, age 8, and two tree farm workers, Frank Landry (right) and Matt Moreau.
sugar cane. I inherited the land and wanted to plant something, so I planted Christmas trees."

These local people operate three of more than 100 Christmas tree farms that have sprung up in 45 Louisiana parishes since commercial production began in the state more than 15 years ago, said Alden Main, forestry specialist for the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

Louisiana’s Christmas tree industry grew out of research performed more than 20 years ago by the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station, Main said.

In 1989, Louisiana farmers sold about 168,750 home-grown Christmas trees, capturing about half of the state's live Christmas tree market, he said.

The Louisiana-grown trees accounted for only 0.5 percent of the 35 million trees sold nationwide in 1989, the National Christmas Tree Association Inc. reports. Christmas trees are grown in all 50 states.

But Louisiana growers have an advantage over their northern neighbors — a shorter growing period that can mean a faster rate of return on their investment, Main said.

In Louisiana, trees take only three to five years to reach the most popular size of 6-8 feet while trees grown in northern states take an average 10 years to reach that height.

Christmas tree sales by Louisiana farmers in 1989 translated into gross farm income, or GFI, of $5.4 million, Main said.

Growers in East Baton Rouge Parish generated $253,000 of that GFI — the third highest among the state’s parishes. Tangipahoa Parish was the GFI leader last year with $528,000. St. Tammany Parish ranked second with $264,000.

Most of the largest, most successful operations in the state are located near Baton Rouge and New Orleans — major urban areas that provide a higher volume of customers, Main said.

About 90 percent of the Louisiana growers sell trees at their farm site, he said. Others sell trees wholesale or operate retail lots in nearby towns and cities.

Mire sells most of his trees to choose-and-cut patrons at his Gonzales farm — a 41-acre site on Cornerview Road, off La. 44. But he also operates several retail outlets in the Gonzales area.

Mire planted his first Christmas trees seven years ago and sold his first crop four years later, he said. At an average 1,000 trees per acre, that crop has grown to about 41,000 trees.

In 1989 — Mire’s second selling season — he sold about 1,500 trees.

He declined to predict sales for this season.

"It depends on the weather," Mire said.

Hot weather chills the Christmas tree business, he said. "When it gets cold and blustery, that’s when people get in the Christmas spirit."

The Bennetts abandoned wholesale and retail outlet sales in recent years to concentrate on a choose-and-cut operation, Barton Bennett said.

"I don’t ever want to sell any other way but choose-and-cut," he said.

The Bennetts began Christmas tree farming in 1978 in Norwood, about 20 miles north of Zachary. They sold trees to "choose-and-cutters" at the Norwood farm, as well as selling wholesale and on retail lots.

After several years, "with that experience, my wife and I felt that if we wanted to stay in the Christmas tree business, we wanted to stay in choose-and-cut because that’s where the fun was," Bennett said.

Since the Norwood farm was too far from Baton Rouge to sustain a profitable choose-and-cut operation, the couple began searching for a new site closer to the metropolitan area.

The property they found on La. 96 north of Zachary had the right type of soil and the right shape — long and narrow — so that trees would be easily accessible from a road running lengthwise through the middle of the site, Bennett said.

The Bennetts planted in 1985 and began selling Christmas trees last year.

They sold 2,400 trees in their first year.

This year, Bennett said, he expects to sell 8,000 trees, which would generate revenues of about $160,000.

Regardless of the sales volume, the season promises to be the most enjoyable, Bennett said.

Choose-and-cut operations offer many advantages over retail lots, Bennett said.

Customers get fresher trees, he said. Choose-and-cut trees can be sold for less, Bennett said, noting that trees sold on retail lots cost an extra $5-$10 to cover the cost of for transporting and selling them.

Also, the tree selection is better on a choose-and-cut farm, he said. Bennett’s largest retail lot held a maximum of 140 trees at one time. His tree farm offers 1,500.

"All the advantages are for choose-and-cut, as long as you don’t mind driving 15-20 miles to get there, and most people don’t mind that," Bennett said.

"Choose-and-cut is really the direction that southern Christmas tree farming is going," he said. "It will gradually replace more and more of the tree lots in town... I hope we will never do anything but choose-and-cut on this farm."

Like the Bennetts, the Pulliams only sell trees from their farm on La. 64 east of Plank Road in Zachary.

The family planted its first trees in 1978 and began selling them three years later.

"My dad, being a CPA, mostly sits down all day," she said. "He decided it would be a way for him to get out of the office and get some exercise."

But, Deville said, "we never dreamed it would be this much work."

Tree cultivation begins with planting in January and February, followed by regular spraying and trimming of the more than 8,000 trees and cutting grass on the 10-acre farm, she said.

"Of course, it’s worse in the summer when the temperature is over 90 degrees and the humidity is up there, too," Deville said.

But Christmas tree farming has its rewards, she said.

The business is profitable, she said. "The physical activity is nice," Deville said. "And it’s kept the family real close."