

INSIDE

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FOR BUSINESS.**



SMALL BUSINESS



JASON MILLER

Sugar Pines Farm owners Fritz Jr. and Jane Neubauer

FROM SEEDS TO SALE

Newest owners of Chesterland Christmas tree farm relish opportunity to play part in families' holiday memories

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Fritz Jr. and Jane Neubauer could see the forest for the trees upon exploring the sale of a business located a few minutes away from their Munson Township home.

The opportunity to buy the 100-acre Sugar Pines Farm in Chesterland, known for its award-winning Christmas trees, presented not only a chance for the couple to fulfill their interest in developing a family business but preserved a holiday tradition for customers.

"We fell in love with it," Ms. Neubauer said. "It's a nice business to be in because you're making people happy and helping them create memories."

The Neubauers acquired the farm in August for \$1.1 million from Carol and Glenn Battles, who began selling Christmas trees 32 years ago but have since retired to California, where most of their children and grandchildren reside.

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Seeds: Planting, upkeep a long process

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"If I could've stayed young forever, I would've stayed in the business forever," joked Mr. Battles, whose trees have earned state and national awards. "I think the transition is going very well. We're happy the Neubauers are carrying on the tradition."

The Battles will be returning this week to assist the new owners with the launch of the year's selling season, which begins the day after Thanksgiving and continues seven days a week through the weekend before Christmas. The farm sells cut-your-own, pre-cut and live-balled trees, including Fraser firs, Canaan firs and blue spruce.

"The Battles have been such good mentors. I don't think we would've bought the property had it not been for their help," Ms. Neubauer said.

The Battles purchased the farm in 1977 and began selling Christmas trees in 1980. The crop has grown from 3,000 to about 22,000 trees, which are in varying stages of their life cycles and spread over 30 acres.

Taking care of business

Despite its growth in both productive acreage and sales — the last five years of which have experienced year-over-year increases — the founders knew their interest had an expiration date. They mulled parceling out the property or selling it to developers, but ultimately were able to keep the farm and business intact.

The venture satisfies the new generation of owners' love of the outdoors and their desire to inte-

FIELDS OF GOLD

Consumers in 2011 were three times more likely to purchase a real tree over an artificial tree, according to the National Christmas Tree Association. That year, about 9.5 million people bought artificial trees, compared with about 30.8 million who purchased live trees. The mean average spent on an artificial tree was \$70.55, for a retail value of \$670 million, compared with \$34.87 spent on a real tree, creating an overall retail value of \$1.07 billion. About a third of the population bought trees at farms, followed by chains, garden centers, retail lots and nonprofits.

grate a family business that they hope sons Fritz III, 8, and Sam, 4, will nurture as they get older. The operation also is a logical business extension for Mr. Neubauer, a certified arborist and owner of Neubauer Land Management Co. Ms. Neubauer previously owned Maple Alley Market Research.

"This place met both needs, from a personal and business angle. Right now, it's more of a hobby but will be a nice part-time income," said Ms. Neubauer, who is hoping to sell about 2,500 trees this season.

Still, operating a Christmas tree farm is not limited to a few weeks during holidays, but is a fairly laborious year-round responsibility.

Tree maintenance is a seasonal requirement at minimum and requires planting, shearing, mowing, insect and pest control and watering throughout their life cycles, which at

Sugar Pines Farm can average six to eight years before a tree is harvested.

"There's a common misperception that you just plant seedlings and wait for them to harvest," Mr. Neubauer said. "That can't be further from the truth."

Another common misconception is that Christmas trees are unsustainable because they are cut down for decorative purposes.

"We're more of the tree-hugger type, and we had to think about what this business means," Ms. Neubauer said. "In reality, this is a crop like any other. We will plant at least one new tree for every tree we harvest."

Once its function as a decoration is over, the tree then can be recycled and chipped into mulch.

"Its life doesn't end in your living room," she said. "We're still being kind to the environment."

The more the merrier

As with starting or acquiring any business, proprietors have a certain expected learning curve to master. The Neubauers have been benefiting from the collaborative nature of Northeast Ohio Christmas tree farm operators, who strategize on growing practices and work to encourage customers to eschew fake trees for their real counterparts.

Members have been coaching the Neubauers to help ensure a seamless ownership transition, said Dan Garey, president of the Northeast Ohio Tree Growers and co-owner of MorningStar Meadow Christmas Tree Farm in Thompson, which is in Geauga County.

"We're more than happy to share our secrets," Mr. Garey said. ■