



## **Season 2 Episode 7 – Christmas Trees**

**May 15, 2023**

Speaker 1

Welcome to the Farming Basics podcast with Olivia Fuller. We'll have sustainable farming tips from growers across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Olivia Fuller

Today we're here at the Ornamental Research Station here in Mobile Alabama with Jeremy Perkins, one of the extension specialist who works predominantly on nursery and greenhouse crops but occasionally works on Christmas trees. We have a growing industry here in the state, and he does a lot of the research to help those producers out. So it's your host, Olivia Fuller, and your co-host, Jacob Kelly.

Olivia Fuller

So Jeremy, why don't you tell us a little bit about your background and what got you involved in Christmas trees?

Jeremy Pickens

Sure. Thanks for letting me speak with you today. Yeah. So like you said on the nursery, a greenhouse specialist and I've been at this game for about six years and Christmas tree production is kind of like a field nursery And so we didn't when Dr. King to retire, we kind of had a void with extension and research efforts towards a Christmas tree production And so, you know, I it just kind of was a natural fit.

Jacob Kelly

I run into this question all the time where people are calling. They got land, they just retired or maybe they're there trying to find something to do. This happened a lot after the pandemic. People want to get into growing something. And quite a few of them call and they want to get in to grow and Christmas trees because they think it's as easy as, you know, just taking the tree and putting it in the ground.

Jeremy Pickens

So a lot of people think that growing Christmas trees is just playing the trees and coming back in a few years and passing. But there's a lot more to it than that. You know, you can commit a good bit of time to it. There's you got to mow the grass. You get a spray for weeds. Yeah. Prune them two or three times a week.

Jeremy Pickens

I mean, a year. And that's very labor intensive. And then there's a pretty intensive spray program with fungicides.

Olivia Fuller

You mentioned pruning them. I know you and I worked on a project out in Pickens County, and you were explaining to me like the printing method and how specific they are. We also we're doing a fertilizer trial. Do you want to talk a little bit about fertilizing the Christmas trees?

Jeremy Pickens

Sure. Yeah. That's one of the areas we're working on right now because most of our fertilizer recommendations are from the eighties and based off Virginia Farm. And really we're growing mainly Leyland Cypress right now. And so we don't have any great recommendations for Leyland Cypress as far as nitrogen goes, but we know they respond well to it. And so we're doing trials to see you know, how do we optimize our fertilizer applications to give us the best growth.

Jacob Kelly

So what varieties are we grow? And in our state compared to North Carolina and the northern areas?

Jeremy Pickens

So that's a great question. So a lot of folks would assume that the trees that we're growing are going to be cut and put in lots, and that's not the case. So a lot of the trees you see in Christmas tree lots and at the box stores, those are going to be firs grown up north and we can grow firs.

Jeremy Pickens

They handle post-harvest very well. They have a long shelf life, but we can't grow those here. It just gets too hot. So most I mean, almost all of our farms are going to be what we call choosing cut operations. So where the client goes out, they pick out their tree and either they or a farm helper will cut the tree down and they they purchase it there it's a whole kind of experience thing.

Jeremy Pickens

It's very tight in agritourism. These guys have really embraced that and made it a part of their operations. So some of the varieties are seeing the species that we grow of Christmas tree wise. The primary one nowadays is Leland Cypress or Murray Cypress are very similar We still grow some Virginia Pines. I used to be the big crop.

Jeremy Pickens

I'd say it's probably 20% of most folks crops now. Then you have several others you know, minor species like Arizona, Cypress or Eastern Cedar or are providing. But those those are kind of the main species we grow here in Alabama.

Olivia Fuller

You know, that's super interesting. I think a lot of people will benefit from knowing what direction to go in if they're playing around with that idea. It seems like it's treated kind of like all the other horticulture crops that needs to be weeded and specific irrigation requirements. Can you talk a little bit about both of those and how they're maybe more unique to the Christmas trees versus other horticulture crops?

Jeremy Pickens

Sure. Yeah. You know, as far as, you know, we control that's a that's a big issue. So I'll step back a little bit and talk about kind of a goal. We have this ties into the fertilizer project we talked about earlier, and that's to get to. Sure. In that production time as much as possible so there's a survey growers and using a benchmark of a 70 foot tree, we're trying to figure out what's the average duration it takes to grow a seven or eight foot tree.

Jeremy Pickens

And we got responses anywhere from two years all the way to five years and you know the faster you can turn over that crop the more money you can make per acre. And so we're really, we feel like three years is a very achievable goal for most people to get that 70 foot benchmark tree. And so that's kind of where our research is headed.

Jeremy Pickens

So, you know, the fertilizer we're trying to speed up, you know, grow some with that. And as far as we control by controlling the weeds, we're also freeing up that fertilizer that would be lost to weeds and that moisture loss in the soil that would be lost. We survive you know, getting weeds out there. We can grow faster tree and we're saving money on fertilizer.

Jeremy Pickens

And so we're working on some stuff with that. You know, we're trying to get growers down to two or three applications a year. Some folks are spraying as much as six. But with the use of pre emerging herbicides, we think we can really cut that back as far as irrigation goes. Now, many of the growers in Alabama use irrigation and most of the time you can get away with this has been a year that's kind of put that to the test has been sort of dry.

Jeremy Pickens

The spring but a lot of people just kind of roll the dice and it works out with rainfall, you know, in our state anyway. But every once in a while it'll, it'll bite you.

Jacob Kelly

So earlier you mentioned sprays. What are we spraying for? Are there many insects or fungal pathogens that are going to attract these trees and kill them dead? And you're going to walk out there and then you're going to have a bunch of brown trees everywhere? Or are these things most resistant? They're all over the place. I assume that there's going to be things that attack and eat them, but you see them all over the place and for the most part, they look pretty good.

Jacob Kelly

Yeah.

Jeremy Pickens

Like any crop is not you know, it's not bulletproof so that does require some routine spraying for certain fungicides, especially the lay cypress. You may see them in the landscape where they start to brown up from the base. And that's a success for a needle White House called parcel or needle blight. And that requires a good bit of fungicide applications during certain times of the year to prevent that.

Jeremy Pickens

As far as insect pests go, there's not many that attack. You know, the lay on Cypress. Now, the Virginia pine chip moth is a big concern and but that's not too big not too difficult to control.

Jacob Kelly

What about bag worms?

Jeremy Pickens

Bag worms. They can be an issue on Arbor bodies are not so much on the Leyland's and then insurance here of course you know but I don't know the control recommendations for those I'll of my head I don't necessarily see that as often as some of the other problems.

Olivia Fuller

Alabama I credit as a proud sponsor of the Farming Basics podcast buying real property isn't the same as buying in town if you're in the market to purchase your own piece of paradise or need an operating line for your farm, you have our friends at Alabama. I credit a call as the local experts and rural real estate financing.

Olivia Fuller

They can help you with everything from homes and lands to tractors and crops because sometimes natural resources need financial resources. And while some lenders don't get it, they do learn more by visiting Alabama at Credit.com. What are some creative ways you have seen growers add value to their farm? You said it's very much in the ag tourism sector and they're having to come up with creative ways to make money in the offseason. How are you seeing the most creative farmers get funds throughout the season?

Jeremy Pickens

That's a great question. There's all kinds of options there. You know, you're really with the Christmas trees your crop is based off of, you know, basically the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is your market, you know, so there's a lot of time you could use on the farm to make money. Some folks like to pay for a photographer to come out.

Jeremy Pickens

So the farm will actually charge a photographer and the photographer has a window of time or they can use props and take family photos and whatnot. You know, a lot of the farms, you know, are diverse, diversified. And so they may have, you know, a pumpkin patch or corn mazes during Christmas. They have a lot of games, things you can draw in, you know, the crowd they're looking for, which is families with small children.

Jeremy Pickens

So our petting zoos or Santa Claus, where they could take photos with I said games, maybe have food trucks out there, hot chocolate. But yeah, there's a lot of different opportunities to make money on that farm or, you know, during Christmas. Also aside from just Christmas trees.

Jacob Kelly

So I'm a Christmas tree grower. I'm a beginning Christmas tree grower. I haven't put plants in the ground. I want to grow Christmas trees. I'm going to grow Christmas trees. Can I just go out there and plant so acres? What's what's the bottom limit maybe? And the top limit for a beginning grower. I mean, can you go out there and

have a successful Christmas tree farm, a choosing cut with one acre of Christmas trees, or are you going to run out of trees pretty quickly?

Jeremy Pickens

I don't really know what the top and bottom end is. You know, just kind of depends on what your goal is. So you could fit, you know, 600 or 700 trees per acre somewhere in that thing. And so, you know, you kind of have to know how many clients would be coming, you know, would you really want to be not too far from sort of urban area where you have a, you know, a nice population or dense population, but so don't be too far from that.

Jeremy Pickens

But you need you need enough acreage to cover, cover whatever customer base you have. You know? So, yeah, you definitely want to stagger productions, you know, want to plant your whole place at one time because you'll have way too many trees available. And once and it can't get too big eventually, but now so like I don't know what the bottom line, I would say most of our farms range from anywhere from five to 30 acres of actual production.

Jeremy Pickens

And so, you know, some people are doing it on the side and they may be a little bit on a they may have day jobs and may do a little bit, you know, on the weekends and after work and they're probably, you know, with a five to ten acre range there. But yeah, I mean that's and as far as planting goes, yeah, you really need to do a lot of planning before you put any plants in the ground.

Jeremy Pickens

And I would highly recommend joining the Southern Christmas Tree Association. So it's a multi-state association made up of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama is it's the best money you could spend. Everybody in the association is super nice and they're very accommodating. They want you to be successful. There's very little competition. So very everybody is very open with information. I have a great Facebook growers page where they share ideas and answer questions, and they also have a workshop in the spring this grower led where they'll have a field day that you can try out equipment.

Jeremy Pickens

They'll show you had a plan to share all that. That is just the best money you could spend as far as experience goes before you even put a plan on the ground there. Things you got to consider. You got to consider, you know, traffic flow, you know, how are you going to move vehicles in and out? Do you have where are they going to park?

Jeremy Pickens

You know, do you want gravel? Can you use grass fencing? You know, if you're going to have a shop where is it going to be located? Or your bar is old, your equipment, you know, those are things you got to kind of take into consideration in timing. You really need to be planning about a year in advance because you got to get access to the to the trees owners or whatever you going to be plant in the field.

Jeremy Pickens

And most often that's going to be a one gallon plant, you know, so you probably need to talk to the supplier, you know, six to eight months in advance to make sure those are available. That just is some sort of plant you need to do in advance.

Jacob Kelly

Jeremy, I've been to one of these conferences or meetings with the association and I keep hearing all this talk about blocking and things like that. What exactly is blocking some growers do it. Other growers. Growers don't do it. Can you tell us a little bit about what you know about Christmas tree flocking.

Jeremy Pickens

You're painting on or blowing on a material? I don't know what does matter, but it makes the tree look like it's been snowed on. Not a lot of people do it. There's a certain percentage of the clients that want that. If I had to guess, it would be not many, probably under 10%, and most of the farms will offer that.

Jeremy Pickens

But if you want to Don, you probably better call the farm in advance and make sure they do it.

Jacob Kelly



All right, Gerri, what are some of the good advice you could give the new growers? Are people just starting out in the Christmas tree business.

Jeremy Pickens

A lot of folks will plants or trees too deep? That's a problem I've seen. And not just in Christmas trees. It can be blueberries and pecans, but it's not made a plant we all plant or tomatoes deep, you know, and it responds well to that. But the Christmas trees, they do not they'll live plant it too deep. But every once in a while, the stars align just right.

Jeremy Pickens

You get too much rain and you start seeing major problems, especially if you have storms and high winds. They don't have those buttress roofs, the kind of supporting from the wind and so they sway back and forth. And eventually you can kind of lean over. So planting with the right depth. And, you know, you could ask what is the right depth?

Jeremy Pickens

And I was always told that you look for the very first root coming off that turnover crown, and that's where you should aim for your grade to be in. So for some of these potted plants which will be using for Christmas tree liners, I to take their grown upon bark. So you can easily just kind of brush it back to you find that first root that's connected to the to the trunk in can make that your target for the grade of the plant to at least match the grade there.

Jeremy Pickens

Other things that I would definitely go with at least a gallon size transplant you know some people try to save some money you save a couple bucks using the four inch pot that could add a whole year to production. And so the savings is really going to cost you because adding another year means it's another year of grass.

Jeremy Pickens

You're going to have to cut herbicide and you're going to spray and just general headaches. So the faster you can turn over the crop, the better. So using a larger transplant can really shave some of that production time off. So those are a couple of things that right out the gate, you know, I think I would make sure I did.

Olivia Fuller

So I'm seeing fertilizer prices go up. Everything is going up. Is that true for the Christmas tree industry as well?

Jeremy Pickens

Yeah, it is. And I don't know how big of impact that is, but I know, you know, a lot of our herbicides and other chemicals, fertilizer, they all went up, you know, maybe more than 30% and so, you know, just like everything, you know, growers may or may not increase their prices. But if they do, it shouldn't be that much the the real Christmas tree board which represents most of the Christmas tree growers in the whole nation did a recent survey in about 70% of the respondents indicated that they would be increasing prices but only we're anywhere from just five to 15% so not too big of a deal but everybody's got to at least

Jeremy Pickens

cover their cost and so that's something you could probably you may you may see this year maybe not too spends on the grower.

Jacob Kelly

Earlier you mentioned that there was like over 300 growers in the state. How does that compare to today how many growers do we have out there?

Jeremy Pickens

I don't have an exact number, but I would guess somewhere between 20 and 30 growers, you know, more and more every year are joining the association. At least that's how I know we get new growers. But yeah, it's anywhere from 20 to 30 right now. I don't know the total acreage of that, but if you wanted to find out if there was a farm near you to visit this season, you can go to the CETA website or you could also just go to any social media platform because that's what these guys use for marketing.

Jeremy Pickens

It's been a major tool of theirs and they use Facebook predominantly, so you can type in their you're in Christmas trees and I guarantee whatever farms near you'll come up.

Olivia Fuller

Thank you so much for joining us and telling us about Christmas trees today. I know you're a big focus is on greenhouses and a lot of controlled environment, agriculture, the nursery industry is growing, especially here in Mobile for right and you've been right there with a couple times. I can't wait to have you back on to talk about that side of things, too.

Olivia Fuller

So thanks again for coming on.

Speaker 1

This has been a production of Alabama extension at Auburn University.