

**Oney's Tree Farm in
Woodstock, Illinois,
has become a place
where Christmas
memories are made,
and treasured.**

By Moira K. Wiley

Home For the Holidays



Courtesy Ron and Dawn Peterson

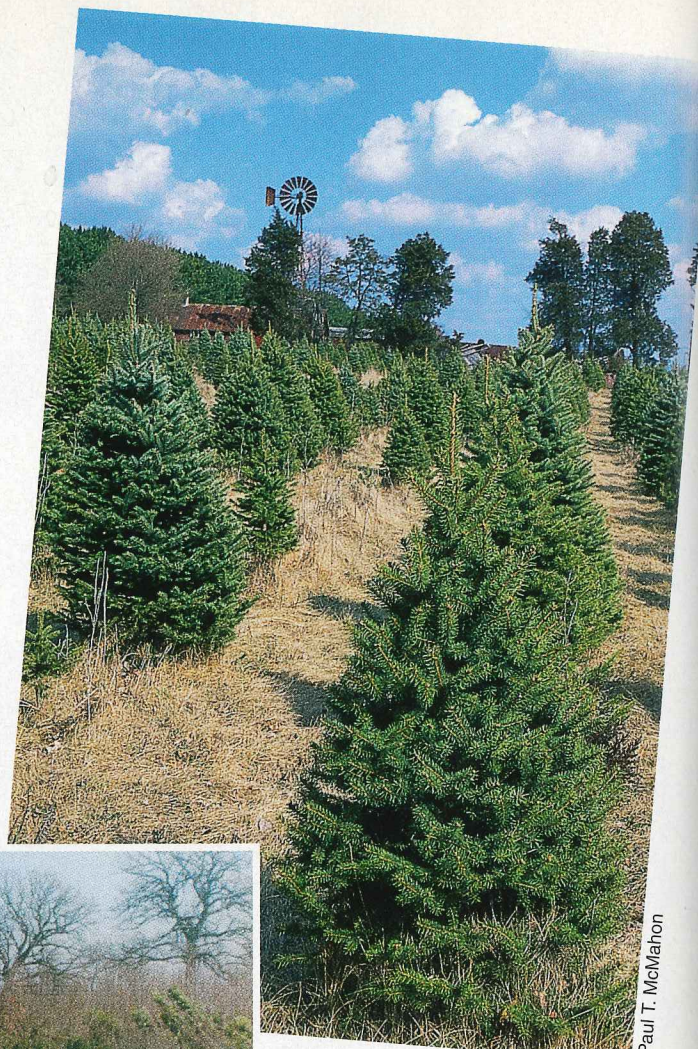
It feels like Christmas every day at Oney's Tree Farm in Woodstock, Ill. Not only do Ron and Dawn Peterson grow Christmas trees on their 110-acre farm, they also raise deciduous trees, shrubs and conifers, along with three reindeer—and they have built a gift shop, bakery and evergreen maze to help draw a crowd each holiday season. Throughout the years, the Peterson's have added more features to enhance the Christmas spirit that surrounds the family farm. Altogether, it took them over 10 years to develop their image as an old-fashioned, traditional place in the country for families to buy a Christmas tree and create long-lasting memories of togetherness.

HISTORY

The Peterson's farm was one of the first established in McHenry County, Ill., when the area was first developed in 1837. The original owners of the farm grew corn and hay for dairy cows, which was the main industry in the area for over 123 years; none of the children, however, took over the land from their parents, as was customary back then. The farm changed hands many times throughout the ensuing years. Then, Oney Nienhuis, a second-generation Dutch farmer, purchased the farm in 1940 and started a dairy, however, he was looking for ways to diversify.

The dairy wasn't paying all the bills and both Oney and his wife, Ella, had to work jobs in town, explains Dawn. While delivering mail for the U.S. Post Office in the late 1950s, Oney saw a field of trees and the idea of a Christmas tree farm began. The couple sold their first trees in the mid 1960s and Oney's Christmas Tree Farm soon became a popular place during the holiday season. When Oney passed away in the late 1970s, his wife Ella couldn't keep up with all the care required to maintain the farm, but she continued until 1984, when the Peterson's purchased it.

Once the Peterson's took over, they developed a keen marketing plan for the sale of their trees and purchased reindeer and other animals that families could see while



Paul T. McMahon

Top: The magnificent farm that exists today is the result of years of hard work and the bills that went with it.



Courtesy Ron and Dawn Peterson

Left: Oney's has expanded into growing shrubs and trees for landscape use, further diversifying their farm and ensuring their future.

visiting. They also converted the barn, built in 1904, into a gift shop, bakery and Christmas decorating center where wreaths, fresh evergreen centerpieces, garlands and other Christmas products are made. The decorating center was a way to recycle trees in the field that weren't quite perfect enough for Christmas trees. They also hire in teams of Percheron horses to pull wagons at Christmastime, and Ron and a neighbor built a candy cane house for their own Mrs. Claus, who visits on the weekends. It took them over 10 years to develop, but Dawn stresses they don't sell just Christmas trees, they are providing "a moment in time for families to share."

A ROUGH START

The magnificent farm that exists today is the result of years

of hard work and the bills that went with it. "I can just hear some readers say, 'Wow, these people pulled this all together,'" says Dawn, "but Ron and I both had to work off the farm for 12 years to pay for not only the development of the farm, but also the expansion. When we moved to the farm there were less than 7,000 trees on this property—we now support an inventory of over 125,000."

When the Peterson's first started out, they were not financially prepared to buy all the farm equipment necessary to make their work easier. "So, we removed stumps with chains attached to our single tractor and hand cleared what we could," recalls Dawn. "The first trees we sold for landscape material were all hand dug compared to our machine methods today. Slowly, we were able to afford skid steers and other equipment to reduce our

physical demands, but this increased our financial obligations. On a good day, our field crews can dig over 56 full-sized trees compared to a fraction of that when we hand dug."

The Petersons use machines for planting when possible, but they continue to hand plant as well since their fields are not clear-cut during Christmas. It may take three years to clear a field of Christmas trees while landscape trees are generally dug from one end of the row to the other. Most trees need to be hand-stacked and hand-pruned at various times. Weed control, disease and insect infestation are always issues, as well. "Contrary to popular opinion, you can't just plant 'em green side up and let 'em grow! Nothing in life is that simple," exclaims Dawn.

EXPANSION AND DIVERSIFICATION

Even with all they had accomplished and their ever-increasing business during Christmastime, the Peterson's learned it was still not enough.

"In general, farmers are optimistic and hardworking and aren't afraid of putting some muscle into their day," says Dawn. "But, that isn't always enough to keep a farm running. You have to be willing to explore new ideas and



Courtesy Ron and Dawn Peterson

Ron and Dawn Peterson, here in 1995 with son, Scott, daughter, Michelle, and reindeer, Ryder, have worked for nearly 20 years to grow their Christmas tree farm to the business it is today.

to diversify your operation when necessary. We reached that point around 1992, when we realized the Christmas business wasn't going to pay all the bills."

So, they diversified. They began by learning about digging trees and starting an evergreen crop. Less than a year later, they started growing deciduous trees and shrubs to further extend their sales season.

"These other plants reach selling maturity much faster (two to three years) than Christmas trees (six- to 10-year rotation)," says Dawn. "We also developed a retail garden center for spring and fall, which is when we actively dig plants. Through a quirk of fate, we connected with a few key people in the wholesale market and our location became a central place for collecting plant material for landscapers in the Illinois and Wisconsin markets. This wholesale market now comprises the greatest amount of our business."

AGRITOURISM

Though their expansion and diversification helped to ensure year-round income, the Peterson's main interest still lies in their Christmas business, which they have grown into a viable agritourism venture. By slowly adding more attractions and activities to draw families to their farm, they overcame each obstacle until their business flourished.

"When I hear the word 'agritourism,' I envision an entire package of events intended to draw families to the farm for fun, as well as education," says Dawn. "In a subtle way, however, these feelings go much deeper than that within the community. We are now on our third generation of family members who visit this farm for the package we present. It's our goal to continue this family love affair. I look forward to seeing these people each year and hearing about their trials and triumphs. So, you see, we are developing friendships and it all starts with the growth of a tree intended for harvest and sale, but results



Paul T. McMahon

Oney's is now on its third generation of family members who visit the farm. The Peterson's believe they are developing friendships, which start with the growth of a tree intended for harvest and sale, but result in an "emotional relationship that eventually protects the farm from destruction."

VISIT ONEY'S

Oney's Tree Farm is open November 29 through December 15, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Weekend activities include Mrs. Claus/North Pole House, pony rides, horse-drawn wagon rides and food offerings. Everyday activities include live reindeer, gift shop in historic barn, evergreen maze, homemade wreaths, garland and centerpieces in the custom decorating center.

"Stay & Play" overnight packages are available through the Woodstock Holiday Inn; (815) 334-9600.

Available trees include: Douglas, Frasier, Concolor and Balsam Firs; Scotch, White, Red and Austrian Pines; and Blue, Green, White, Norway and Serbian Spruces.

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in this complicated emotional relationship that eventually protects the farm from destruction."

NOT JUST GREEN TREES

Dawn and her husband knew nothing about farming when they began. Ron had spent his life in the building trades and Dawn worked as a registered nurse. So, how did the couple get started in what has become their sole livelihood?

"I was reading the local paper one day and saw in the classifieds that the Christmas tree farm down the road was for sale," says Dawn. "It began with just an offhand comment to my husband and I never expected him to jump off the couch and yell, 'I want to buy it!' I couldn't believe it. I thought he was nuts and I told him so. But, he kept saying he was spending too much time working long hours away from the family. He felt that buying the farm would be hard work, but the kids would know where to find him, and it would offer some flexibility in his working hours so he wouldn't miss so many family events."

Dawn reminded him that he didn't know the first thing about farming, but Ron insisted he could learn. He was convinced he could find the right people and learn, just as he'd learned everything else in his life. He asked for Dawn's faith, which she said was a bit worrisome many times during the first five years. But in the end her husband's workaholic nature prevailed.

"Books on horticulture began to pile up in the house and Ron seemed to have a knack for finding home phone numbers of people who taught horticulture or who had vast experience in tree farming. I think they put up with him because they felt his passion for growing trees and his desire to learn, or maybe they hoped he would quit calling them if they would just answer his questions. But, Ron didn't just want to grow a tree to sell, he wanted

to grow *good* trees."

Today, Ron leads the field crew and is the main equipment operator. Dawn says he makes all their lives easier by having the ability to fix even the most stubborn of machines or by picking up the pieces the rest of them can't seem to roundup. In the meantime, Dawn runs the retail garden center, gift shop, and byproducts and craft areas. She also does most of the ordering of materials and supplies, and is their inventory analyst and "tagger" (someone who goes out into the fields and tags or flags which items need to be dug up the next day to fill orders or restock inventory), which is one of her favorite jobs because it gets her out of the office and out in the field, which is very peaceful.

The Peterson's children are involved, as well. Their 27-year-old son, Scott, primarily runs the wholesale end of the business, but he's also an expert tagger and produces lists of things he'd like to see growing in their fields.

"Scott has been driving farm machinery since he was 11 years old," says Dawn. "I think he could load a truck in his sleep, if he had to."

Also involved is their 19-year-old daughter, Michelle, who is a sophomore in college, studying agriculture. She helps with summer inventory and does some pruning, tilling, mowing and tagging of landscape material. "Michelle is also in charge of the bakery area at Christmas and is sometimes pulled for cash register detail," says Dawn. "I like her flexibility. She even paints outbuildings as needed!"

"My kids learned from an early age what it means to work as a team. They understand that if some jobs aren't completed, it may have very serious results that could affect the life of someone or something else. They always know how to prioritize and they understood time management at a much younger age than most children. It's funny that I'm using corporate words to describe what American farm families have known for centuries, but I've always said I wouldn't hesitate to hire a teenager raised on a farm because they generally have good work ethics and are more responsible than other kids."



The Peterson's hire in teams of Percheron horses to pull wagons into the fields of Christmas trees.

Courtesy Ron and Dawn Peterson



FARM AND HOME

When it comes to hindsight, the Peterson's have few complaints and no regrets. "Our farm is also our home," says Dawn. "The biggest difficulty we have is ensuring we have time for privacy for our own family. Unfortunately, when you have an agritourism business, a small percent of the people feel they should have access to you at any time they choose. It's a joke around our house that there's a special signal that alerts customers to the precise moment we sit down to our evening meal. It has become such a common occurrence that my husband often insists on eating out so we can finish a meal without interruption. But, there's nothing in this world like a walk through the fields during a sunrise or sunset.

"Living on the farm makes you aware of the seasons intimately and gives you the ability to pray in a way that city dwellers will never know or understand. I cannot imagine learning all of this anywhere else. Raising our children on a farm has been one of the most rewarding commitments we have ever made and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world."

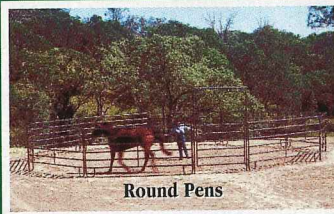
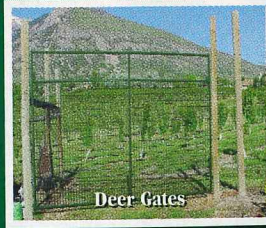
In the end, Oney's Tree Farm not only became their life's work, it also became their home and the place they long to share with other families. The Peterson's farm ultimately became "a special place in the country where families can create memories worth repeating." **HF**

Ron and a neighbor built a candy cane house for their own Mrs. Claus, who visits on the weekends.

Moira K. Wiley is a freelance writer and editor based in Oklahoma.

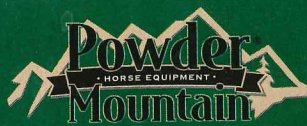
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