



# Three Cheers For Cherry Lake!

*Progressive production practices and unselfish dedication to the industry are the cornerstones of Cherry Lake Tree Farm's success.*

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*Published in December 2000, Ornamental Outlook Vol. 9, No. 12*

Ever wonder where the future of the nursery industry is headed? Well, if you want answers, you can look to Cherry Lake Tree Farm in Groveland, FL. Cherry Lake is not only one of the most successful tree-growing operations in the South, its progressive production and management practices offer a glimpse into the nursery of the future.

"To provide trees and horticultural knowledge that make an immediate and lasting difference in landscape beauty," is Cherry Lake's stated mission – which divulges the secret that Cherry Lake's customers already know: When you buy a tree from Cherry Lake, you're also buying a wealth of knowledge and dedication. On behalf of every grower that has ever benefited from Cherry Lake's quality products, service, and information, we congratulate the entire staff for being selected as *Ornamental Outlook's* Operation of the Year.

## **Planting Roots**

"From the very beginning we were interested in growing trees with superior root systems," says Cherry Lake President and CEO Michel Sallin. Cherry Lake growers have become masters of developing good root growth in all of their crops. From the first day a cutting is stuck, to the day it is transferred to a 670-gallon container (the largest finished size on the farm), the utmost attention is given to developing strong, fibrous, and resilient root systems. "The trees you're going to have 50 years down the road will depend on how you start your liner," says Sallin. Therefore, Cherry Lake has always propagated its own trees and started with its own liner material. And in 1998, Cherry Lake shared its propagation experience with the rest of the industry by introducing its Total Quality Liners division.

For Cherry Lake, growing good roots also means building strong relationships with customers and other growers. Positioning themselves as leaders, the growers at Cherry Lake are quick to share their horticultural knowledge with the rest of the industry.

"We really believe that we're on the leading edge of growing, and our philosophy is that we will open that information up to the whole industry," says Ty Sherman, Cherry Lake's director of sales and marketing. "By educating people, we'll increase the overall quality of the industry." Cherry Lake growers are active in the Florida Nurserymen and Growers Association, the Southern Nurserymen's Association, and the Texas Nursery and Landscape Association. And Cherry Lake has organized many industry events, including this year's National Millennium Arbor Day Celebration in Sarasota, FL, and the yearly Trees of Gold Symposium.

"We benefit from the excellent programs out at Cherry Lake," says Julie loss, horticulture program manager with the Orlando, FL, parks bureau and a Cherry Lake customer for over 10 years. loss is not alone. Hundreds of growers attest to the quality of knowledge that is provided

through not only Cherry Lake's personnel, but also from the information they provide through industry associations, events, and Cherry Lake's own Web site, [www.cherrylake.com](http://www.cherrylake.com).

"We give tours about twice a month," says Director of Production David Ressler. He doesn't hesitate to show growers the nuts and bolts of his operation, from the semiautomatic potting shed, to the acres of trees planted in new "air pots." The air pots, he says, permit tree roots to self-prune, while allowing Cherry Lake to ship without worrying about excessive containers, which would otherwise clutter their distribution lines --- and landfills.

### **Gaining Ground**

Production is a science at Cherry Lake. Whether in the greenhouses or the fields, it's easy to see the operation's efficiency at work.

Therefore, production is no longer the primary challenge. "The biggest challenge is to bring this operation to the next level," says Didier Jupillat, director of planning and process integration. So, the executives at Cherry Lake have shifted gears from not just growing trees, but growing an entire business. Cherry Lake is beginning to think like a large corporation and carefully learning the language of business: processes, vertical integration, distribution channels, supply lines, and acquisitions.

"They tend to run more like a nonagricultural business than any other farm I know," says Richard Beeson, a plant physiologist at the University of Florida who has worked with Cherry Lake on several projects.

Cherry Lake's owners are even looking at becoming a public company.

"We're not there yet," admits Ann Graham, chief financial officer. "Before we get there, we need to grow to a certain size."

With over 800 acres already in production, the issue of further growth is important, says Ressler. "Growing Cherry Lake larger isn't the challenge. It's the fact that we know that as we grow we've got to keep improving. We've got to grow and we've got to advance."

Partnering with other growers, distributors, and suppliers will help Cherry Lake expand quickly and wisely, says Graham.

### **Maintaining Personnel**

No matter how fast or how big Cherry Lake grows, the farm's executives know that their most valuable resources are their employees. Getting the most work from field laborers – while providing them with the greatest benefits possible – has added to their overall success.

A program that is fairly new to Cherry Lake is a "team-based pay" system. Workers are assigned specific responsibilities and are paid as a unit. If the team is able to streamline – or able to increase their individual output – one or two members of the team can be shifted to another area of the farm, thus allowing the remaining members to reap a larger share of their team's pay. According to Ressler, team-based systems promote greater efficiency and productivity – much more than the standard piece rate paid by most tree farms.

"And the benefits here are much better," adds Graham. "We have health insurance, a 401 K plan, and offer free life insurance for everyone," she says. "We also provide educational

assistance. We want to help laborers learn English." The benefits package allows Cherry Lake to retain a year-round staff of about 250 employees, 142 of which are field workers.

### **Meeting Challenges**

In a time when the nursery industry is growing faster than the plants themselves, Cherry Lake has stepped forward to meet the challenges of change by implementing new technologies and adopting a nonagricultural business model. The tree farm has consistently created – not followed – the trends. Cherry Lake has also made the commitment to help the entire industry, not just its own business. So as the future approaches, everyone will benefit from their success.