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Ask Cherry Lake Tree Farm's owner, president and CEO, Michel Sallin, how he got into the ornamental tree business, and he'll tell you – it was an accident. Sallin was originally involved in citrus, producing and exporting fruit to Europe and Asia beginning in 1979. Then a major freeze hit Central Florida in December 1983, followed by another big freeze in January 1985. "We lost about 600 acres of citrus groves in Lake County," Sallin says. "We decided that citrus was a very risky business."

Armed with plenty of land, equipment, and growing experience, the company switched its focus to ornamental trees – and in 1985, Cherry Lake Tree Farm was born. Today the operation occupies 800 acres in Groveland, FL and does about \$16 million in sales annually.

Strong Roots

Cherry Lake Tree Farm offers 150 varieties, including most landscape trees grown in the southeast U.S. All material is container-grown, and is available as liners on up to 670-gallon trees. Cherry Lake serves landscape and retail customers throughout the Southeast.

Since its founding nearly 15 years ago, Cherry Lake has propagated all of its own material – something that the organization takes pride in. "We've always believed that propagation is the most important single step in the tree-growing process," Sallin said. "From day one of our operation, we've put a lot of work into trying to master propagation."

Liners get their start inside Cherry Lake's eight propagation greenhouses, which are sawtooth-designed plastic houses with 12-foot ceilings and automated environmental controls. Mist beds are under individual control so that mist schedules can be tailored to each tree variety, and light sensors within the greenhouses adjust mist frequencies in response to weather conditions. The time of year that cuttings are harvested and the type of rooting hormone used are also variety-specific to encourage rapid and abundant root growth. In addition, Cherry Lake propagators take advantage of developments in container technology, such as fabric grow-bags and air-pruning containers, to promote a healthy root system in all their liners and trees.

In 1998, after 13 years of perfecting their propagation techniques, Cherry Lake launched a

separate liner division, Total Quality Liners by Cherry Lake. "Today, propagation is one of our core competencies. That's why we decided to open our liner division," Sallin explained. "We thought we had something special, and we wanted to share that with other growers." (see sidebar)

Branching Out

While propagation gets a lot of emphasis at Cherry Lake, they also pay special attention to developing the structure of the finished tree. The operation has been a long-time supporter of the Florida Department of Agriculture's efforts to revise the Florida Grades and Standards for nursery crops. Cherry Lake horticulturist Alan Heinrich served on the committee that redesigned the grades and standards for trees.

"Our customers told us that they wanted a better system," Sallin said. "That's why we supported this movement from the beginning. Before we had the new Florida Grades and Standards, it was very difficult for two reasonable people to look at the same tree and determine the same grade."

The revision process took 10 years, with the new Grades and Standards document released in 1998. According to Sallin, the new guidelines are gaining approval of growers and customers alike. "Several municipalities and county governments have redesigned their landscape ordinances around the new Florida Grades and Standards," he said. "I think it's the best system in the country, and I would not be surprised if the Florida Grades and Standards become the national grades and standards."

Cherry Lake grows their trees according to the new standards, with the goal of producing landscape trees that are both beautiful and structurally sound. In addition to applying these principles to their production practices, of effort into educating its customers about the importance of tree quality.

"We feel it is not enough for us to produce good quality trees," Sallin said. "It's part of our job to explain to our customers, and to the customers of our customers, why it's important to plant quality trees in the landscape." To that end, Cherry Lake sponsors tours of their operation and on-site seminars designed to educate landscape architects and developers about the importance of quality root systems and proper tree structure.

Progressive Growth

Cherry Lake Tree Farm has enjoyed continuous success since its inception. "Since 1985, we have been growing at an average rate of 30% per year," Sallin said. The company is planning future expansion, especially within the Total Quality Liners division, to keep up with this level of growth. A \$750,000 project to upgrade the farm's irrigation system was initiated in 1998, and is expected to be completed within a year. "The objective with the new system is to substantially reduce our water consumption, to improve the quality of our trees, and to reduce the operating costs of our irrigation system," he said.

Sallin predicts that technology will play a major role in the tree industry into the next century, in terms of both production and customer service. "I think that growing trees is becoming less of an art, and more of a science," he said. "Every year new technologies are introduced that allow us to produce better trees at very competitive prices." He also sees the Internet playing a greater role, allowing landscape architects and contractors to tag trees and monitor their trees' progress online. "That will save a lot of cost, because it's very expensive when people have to

come out and tag their trees."

Sallin looks forward to working more closely with his customers in the future. "I think growers of large trees will become more involved at the landscape design stage of the project," he said. "Our industry is getting more customer-oriented, which I think is excellent."