

CHRISTMAS *in July*

by Valerie Reinhardt
HORTICULTURE EDUCATION SPECIALIST

CHRISTMAS IN JULY? Not exactly—but for Lake Metroparks volunteer Joe Bertone it's Christmas all year. You see, Joe is a Christmas tree grower and for the past 12 years, he has been planting, pruning and cultivating Farmpark's Christmas tree farm—a job that spans the seasons.

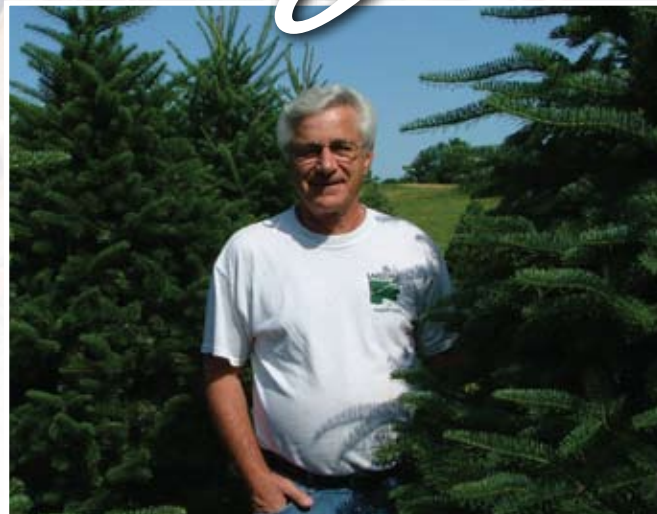
Joe began volunteering at Farmpark in 1996, helping to maintain the hydroponics display. But Joe's real love was growing Christmas trees. A retired Christmas tree grower, he still had the itch to grow trees, which was a bonus for Farmpark. Joe approached Farmpark's horticulture manager and suggested planting a Christmas tree farm to illustrate an important agricultural industry in Northeast Ohio. A spot just east of the Plant Science Center was chosen for its nice slope for drainage and its proximity to the publicly viewable gardens. The soil was then worked up and rows were lined out.

The next step was acquiring tree stock. Joe was able to secure a yearly donation of three-year-old evergreens from Berkey Nurseries in Spartanburg, Pennsylvania. Joe selected varieties of evergreens that grow well in this part of Ohio and in the clay soils that make up Farmpark's fields.



(Above) Farmpark's tree farm near the Plant Science Center.

(Right) Joe Bertone trims the trees to create a more symmetrical and attractive look.



Retired Christmas tree grower and Lake Metroparks volunteer Joe Bertone lovingly cultivates the trees throughout the year.

The first rows didn't seem impressive at the time, but they grew and when new rows were added, the tree farm began to take shape. After seven years, some of the fast growing scotch pines were ready to be harvested. Other varieties took as long as 12 years to reach a harvestable size.

You can't just plant Christmas trees and wait—it takes careful pruning and cultivating to create the perfect tree, which Joe has done with loving care. The trees are trimmed to make them more symmetrical and full. Every spring, trees are pruned after they have candled (candling refers to the new spring growth that looks like candles on the branch tips).

With each year that passes, new trees are added. Farmpark currently has approximately an acre of trees under cultivation. In 2008, Farmpark was finally able to harvest a majority of its own trees for the Country Lights holiday event.

What was once just a few rows of sapling trees is now an impressive stand of Christmas trees in all stages. None of this would have been accomplished without the labor and vision of volunteer Joe Bertone.