

Christmas tree farm always 'ever green'

BY JILL CORRIN



Frank and Cathy Genovese run an "evergreen" business through and through. Not only do they grow and sell Christmas trees, but they apply environmentally friendly, or "green," practices to nearly every facet of their Candy Cane CHRISTmas Tree Farm in Oakland County, and that includes marketing cutting-edge "living Christmas trees."

For their progressiveness and dedication to protecting the environment, the Michigan Farm Bureau (MFB) honored the couple with the organization's 2007 Award for Proactive Leadership in Ecology Management.

Now in its fourth year, the award goes to an individual, farm or partnership whose natural resources stewardship practices contribute to the protection of the environment, while maintaining or enhancing productivity and profitability.

The Genoveses were nominated for the award by the Oakland County Farm Bureau, and selected from a field of 25 nominees submitted by county Farm Bureaus from across the state.

The pair was formally recognized Nov. 27 at the MFB 88th Annual Meeting in Grand Rapids, where they were awarded a prize John Deere Gator compliments of Fillmore Equipment, Harvey's Ag Solutions, Syngenta Crop Protection, CJD Farm Consulting, Dennings & Associates, and NTH Consultants.

In nominating the Genoveses for the award, Jackie Scramlin, a director

on the Oakland County Farm Bureau Board of Directors, described the Candy Cane farm as a "model of efficient management," adding the family offers "friendly service to the public ... and education about how to promote and protect the resources of our area."

Operating from 30 acres nestled amid a residential area of Oxford, the "green" practice gaining the most notoriety has been the farm's addition of "living Christmas trees." These trees are planted in a lightweight soil mix using a "pot-in-pot" system that allows the tree to retain its root structure when dug. With the roots intact, a tree adorned for the holidays can survive longer indoors and be planted outdoors once the holidays are over.

The Genoveses have been pioneers in introducing the popular "living" trees to Michigan. They began growing the variety in 2003 and today remain the first and only Michigan nursery to success-

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With support from:



March 2008



Cropping



Farmstead



Livestock

Preventing soil nutrient losses during spring snowmelt



BY ALLEN KRIZEK

Every spring, snowmelt and rain can make managing an agricultural cropping system a challenging proposition. In addition to delaying the start of spring field work, there are other processes underway that can cause contamination of ground water and surface water.

The seasonal excess water is a medium for movement of nutrients and soil away from the cropping system above ground through runoff or into the soils via leaching.

Leaching – the infiltration of water into the soil – can carry nutrients deep into thawed and sandy soils. It is most likely to occur during the late fall, winter and early spring, when crop growth is low or non-existent, and following rainfall or snowmelt. If the nutrients are carried beyond the crop's root zone, they don't contribute to plant growth and can adversely impact groundwater quality. Groundwater is the drinking water source for nearly all rural residents and for about 40 percent of Michigan residents.

Runoff from heavy or frozen soils can carry nutrients and soil particles to ditches, streams and other surface water bodies. The erosion and discolored surface water makes it easier for both farm and nonfarm residents to see. Appropriate conservation practices can help significantly reduce runoff losses that are not only unsightly, but cause farm environmental and economic losses, too.

Leaching and runoff losses are not new occurrences, but efforts to reduce them are becoming more

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Upcoming Events



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available to Michigan
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Michigan Blueberry Growers and MAEAP

North America is the world’s leader for blueberry production, growing nearly 90 percent of the world’s blueberry crop. Michigan is the number one state for blueberry production, producing 32 percent of the nation’s crop and is fast becoming one of the major Michigan commodities involved in the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP).

The blueberry farms are mostly located in the five Southwestern counties that border Lake Michigan. Of Michigan’s eighty three counties, Van Buren leads in blueberry production with 40 percent of Michigan’s blueberry acres and 33 percent of Michigan’s blueberry farms. They also lead with the acres tied to MAEAP. In 2006, Michigan’s 575 blueberry farmers produced 83 million pounds of blueberries which were valued at 139.7 million dollars.

Location	# of Farms	Acreage	Percent of MI BB Farms	Percent of MI BB Acreage
Michigan	575	17,000	-----	-----
Van Buren	191	7,250	33%	40%
Ottawa	111	5,150	19%	29%
Allegan	79	2,700	14%	15%
Berrien	62	995	11%	6%
Muskegon	25	1,060	4%	6%
Others	107	915	19%	5%

The Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) is a proactive program helping farmers voluntarily reduce risks of pollution. MAEAP teaches producers how to identify and prevent environmental risks while complying with state and federal environmental regulations. Farmers who successfully complete the three phases of a MAEAP system are rewarded by becoming verified in that system. The three phases of the program are: Education, On-Farm Risk Assessment, and Third Party Verification.

Mark Holtzman of Holtzman Blueberries adds; “It’s a good program but you have to be willing to make some changes. MAEAP really gives guidelines to follow so you know you’re protecting the environment, complying with laws, and have Right to Farm Protection.”

Farmstead Verified

- Leduc Blueberries, Paw Paw
- Cornerstone Agriculture/Bodtke Farms, Grand Junction
- Holtzman Blueberries, South Haven

Cropping Verified

- Holtzman Blueberries, South Haven

Working towards Farmstead Verification

- Steve Hunt/New Horizon, Grand Junction
- True Blue Farms, Grand Junction
- Aleman Blueberries, Pullman
- O’Gee Blueberries, Covert
- Arellano Farms, Covert
- Patrice Hartmann, Lacota
- Brian Ensing, Fennville

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Evergreen

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fully grow 6-foot-tall trees of this nature for sale on a large-scale basis.

Some of the Genoveses’ other environmental stewardship practices are less obvious to their neighbors but are just as significant. For instance, the nursery is the first choose-and-cut Christmas tree farm in the state to install a drip irrigation system. Unlike standard irrigation systems which spray streams of water over crops, the drip system distributes water directly to a tree’s root system, minimizing the amount of water lost to evaporation and providing better water conservation overall.

The farm is small enough that the Genoveses can plant trees individually by hand using a small gas-powered auger. The practice eliminates the need to till the entire field, thus reducing soil erosion. They also follow integrated pest management practices to minimize pesticide use and are proud to report that they have not used any insect sprays over the last four years.

In addition, the family provides habitat for wildlife and promotes the benefits of trees to the environment through several local outreach efforts that include providing free tree transplants in the spring to returning Christmas tree customers.

The operation also stands out as the first farm in Oakland County verified in the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP), which is a voluntary program that helps farmers identify and eliminate or minimize environmental risks on their farm.

To earn verification in the MAEAP Cropping and Farmstead Systems, the Genoveses had to demonstrate that the farm operates in compliance with all applicable state and federal environmental regulations and generally accepted farming practices, and that meant making some improvements to the farm. For example, a new pesticide/fertilizer storage facility was built far enough away from an irrigation well and pond to meet the state’s setback requirements for minimizing the risk of potential ground-water contamination.

“Frank and Cathy Genovese and their Candy Cane CHRISTmas Tree Farm bring out the best in agriculture and embody the spirit of Michigan Farm Bureau’s Proactive Leadership in Ecology Management Award in every way,” said MFB President Wayne H. Wood.

“They’re innovative in their agricultural production and marketing. They’re committed to protecting the environment. They’re superb ambassadors for agriculture in their local community. And they’re role models for the entire farming industry,” said Wood. “They’re proof that the American farmer’s legacy as a natural-born conservationist continues today.”

Soil nutrient losses

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important as the state's water supply is more closely monitored and used by diverse interest groups. Agricultural growers and contractors must continue to proactively demonstrate wise stewardship of the state's land and water resources.

Stewardship practices for your farm

Soil testing

Soil testing is the best tool for obtaining an inventory of soil nutrients. Once a grower has an up-to-date soil test (less than four years old), he or she can better determine whether the next crop will need supplemental nutrients.

As fertilizer becomes more expensive and less available, it is important that the soil sample accurately represents the field being tested. Take at least 20 sub samples for each 15 to 20 acres of uniform field area. See Michigan State University (MSU) Extension Bulletin E-498, "Sampling Soils for Fertilizer and Lime Recommendations," for proper soil sampling procedures. It is available from any county MSU Extension office, or can be downloaded at <http://web2.msue.msu.edu/bulletins/Bulletin/PDF/E0498.pdf>.

Realistic yield goals

Farm surveys have shown that many crop growers are overly optimistic in assessing their yield goals. Selecting an unrealistically high yield goal can lead to over-fertilization, the loss of farm income and potentially threaten water quality.

Fertilizer nutrients beyond what a growing crop requires often remain in the soil after harvest and are subject to leaching and runoff losses during the winter and spring snowmelt. To avoid this problem, plan for realistic yields—those that have been achieved at least 50 percent of the time.

Split applications of nitrogen fertilizer

Yield benefits of split or side-dressed nitrogen (N) application for corn have frequently been observed on sandy soils. Though the benefits of side-dressing N on fine-textured soils are rarely seen, there is no question that side-dressing nitrogen can improve its efficiency on all soil types.

Additionally, split N applications allow the grower to more accurately assess yield potential of fields later in the season. A good start to the growing season may mean increased yield potential and therefore more N fertilizer and vice versa; a poor stand, poor weed control and other problems may mean less N fertilizer applied as a side-dress application.

The pre-side-dress nitrate test (PSNT), available through your local MSU Extension office, can further refine the appropriate N fertilizer rate to be side-dressed.

Each year, evidence of uneven fertilizer distribution can be seen, particularly on winter wheat. The uneven distribution of fertilizer results in less than optimum plant growth and the potential loss of excess nutrients to ground and surface water.

Michigan Right-to-Farm Act guidelines call for annual equipment calibration and records to document that the calibration took place. The guidelines also state that fertilizer applications must be consistent with MSU recommendations. Though these recommendations may be less than some commercial laboratories recommend, numerous studies have shown that they are adequate and economical.

Conservation crops and buffers

Cover crops, green manures and forage crops can be very beneficial in preventing wind and water erosion, as well as nutrient losses from the cropping system. These conservation crops are well suited to recover nitrate N from soils and thereby prevent excessive nitrate leaching. Con-

servation crops are well suited to most soils in Michigan and can be used more effectively than they are now.

Seeding vegetated buffer areas adjacent to drains, streams and other water bodies can effectively reduce nutrient and soil movement to surface water bodies. Researchers have observed that it is common for limited areas (as little as 10 percent) in an agricultural watershed to contribute the majority of the soil and nutrients leaving the landscape. By focusing conservation practices on those environmentally sensitive areas, growers can reduce nutrient and soil losses.

Recordkeeping

Unfortunately, it is no longer good enough to just be a good conservation manager; farmers must also be able to document good conservation practices. Michigan Right-to-Farm Act guidelines recommend that specific records be kept for nutrients (including manure), pesticides and irrigation management practices. You can review the recommended records at <http://www.michigan.gov/mda> and search for "Right to Farm."

For more help with conservation practices on the farm, contact any Michigan conservation district or MSU Extension county office.

Allen Krizek is Michigan State University Extension Liaison with the Groundwater Stewardship Program.

Small MAEAP signs attract attention

On a cold, blustery afternoon in December, Michigan Groundwater Stewardship technician Dan Busby stopped by Black Star Farms in Leelanau County, near Suttons Bay. He was there to talk with Black Star's farm manager, John Ayers. Black Star Farms was among the first of several vineyards now verified in MAEAP in Northwest Michigan.

Dan was in the process of showing John Ayers the new small MAEAP sign. Being the slow season for vineyards, only two other people were in Black Star's wine tasting room. That couple happened to be a husband and wife from a Saginaw County farm operation. John started talking with the couple about MAEAP, and before long Dan suggested that they should have a Farm*A*Syst completed for their operation and gave them contact information for the groundwater technician in Saginaw County. It's amazing how a little sign can generate interest from your customers!

Small MAEAP signs (8 1/2 x 11) were developed as a convenient way to display MAEAP participation. If you are MAEAP verified and would like to purchase a small sign for only \$5, please contact Carrie Vollmer-Sanders, Michigan Farm Bureau, at 517-323-7000, ext. 2026 or by email at cvollme@michfb.com.



MAEAP small farm signs boost interest from customers.

Agriculturally Speaking... MAEAP is good for ag

BY DON KOIVISTO

Regarded as stewards of the land, Michigan farmers are intensely involved with one of the state's pioneering environmental initiatives – the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP).

MAEAP is a voluntary program for farmers encouraging effective land stewardship and works toward compliance with environmental regulations.

To date, more than 5,500 Michigan producers have attended MAEAP-sponsored educational sessions.

In recent years, commonly used conservation practices have been challenged by a variety of factors, including an increased number of neighbors, changes in on-farm practices, and improved awareness of how traditional practices could impact surrounding waters. In addition, new regulations and genuine consumer concern regarding the environment continue to have an impact on traditional farming practices. Michigan farmers have taken a proactive approach through MAEAP to guarantee their farms are both sustainable and environmentally friendly.

Michigan is one of the most agriculturally diverse states. As a result, a one-size-fits-all approach to environmental protection simply does not work on all state farms. MAEAP effectively overcomes this challenge by offering three areas of concentration or "systems" - Livestock, Farmstead, and Cropping. Each system focuses on a different aspect of a farming op-

eration. Producers can become verified in all systems applicable for their farms – regardless of farm size or commodity.

In addition to robust educational requirements, producers are required to work with trained consultants and technicians to establish environmental goals and address identified risks. Following completion of a farm-specific risk assessment, and implementing any required corrective actions, farmers may request a third-party objective review by MDA.

MDA verifies that the educational and risk assessment requirements have been met; the farm is in conformance with Michigan's Right to Farm Generally Accepted Practices, and the practices in place adequately address environmental risks. The farm is then "verified" and the farmer is eligible to install a sign to recognize this outstanding accomplishment to the community and consumers.

Currently, there are more than 500 farms that are MAEAP verified. Each continues to demonstrate sound environmental practices to protect Michigan's vast natural resources while building positive neighbor and community relations.

MAEAP's science-based standards allow farmers to address environmental concerns while remaining economically viable and protecting the environment while contributing to the economy.

Michigan's MAEAP-verified farms are proud of their environmental accomplishments.

MAEAP is a coalition of agricultural producers, commodity organizations, state and federal agencies, Michigan State University and conservation groups and is located at MDA headquarters in Lansing.

Don Koivisto is director of the Michigan Department of Agriculture

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