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Christmas tree farmers hope for clear, cold weather for the 2003 holiday season

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — All farmers watch the weather, but for Christmas tree farmers the weather vigil is intensified because their selling season is squeezed between Thanksgiving and December 25.

"We just have this small window of opportunity," said Debra Marolt, a teacher and owner with her husband, Mike, of the 5-acre Pine Mountain Tree Farm in Corinth. "If the weather is bad and people get ready to put up their trees, they'll pull into Marvin's or Lowe's or Wal-Mart and just throw one in the trunk."

The good news for tree farmers who sell direct to consumers is that the economy has strengthened in recent months. Unemployment is down in Mississippi and nationally, and retail industry analysts say shoppers are more in the mood to spend money this year than last.

"I think the economy is better and I think people will come out and buy," said Mike Marolt, who hopes to sell 300 to 350 of his Leyland cypress, Carolina Sapphire and Scotch pine trees this holiday season, about the same as last year.

More good news for tree farmers: Industry overcrowding combined with competition from chain stores selling both real and artificial trees has thinned the ranks of farmers, giving those still standing some growing room. In Mississippi and Louisiana, the number of tree growers declined from a peak of about 600 in the mid-1980s to about 80 today.

"Our business is getting better because so many people are finding it's hard work," said Ben Moseley, owner with his wife, Jane, of two 45-acre tree farms in Florence where more than 3,000 trees are tagged for sale this season. "Our main competition is Wal-Mart."

More critical to tree farmers than competition from Wal-Mart chain stores sold 21 percent of all Christmas trees last year — in fact that, increasingly, people choose fake trees over the real thing.

In 1990, of the 70 million trees sold, about half were real trees. By 2002, 70 percent of the 79.53 million trees sold were artificial, according to the National Christmas Tree Association.

"They're making them nicer now, and they even have them decorated," said Al Acosta, who says the popularity of artificial Christmas trees is hurting business at his 30-acre Children's Christmas Tree Forest in Carriere in Pearl River County.

But Christmas tree farms are increasingly Americans' top choice as the place to buy a tree. In 2002, 35 percent of real trees were bought at tree farms, compared to 19 percent in 1996.

Tree farmers increase their chances of making a sale by offering things that stores can't.

At the Marolt farm in northeast Mississippi, the five acres shared with horses, geese and ducks, a fish-stocked pond and a flock of turkeys that frequently wander over from a neighbor's land.

Acosta's tree farm in south Mississippi — besides 9,000 acres of varieties of pine and cedar — has a pumpkin patch, fish pond, hayrides and free Easter Egg hunts for the children of those who buy a Christmas tree.

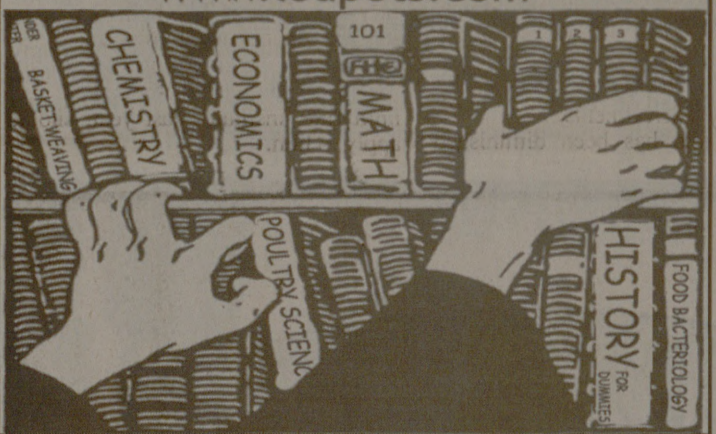
"We say we're selling memories," said Moseley, whose 40-acre Mississippi property offers sleigh rides and farm tours and has a shop and petting zoo.

"The kids on the tours, they say they didn't know trees grew like this. They thought you got them at Wal-Mart," he said.

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King remains hospitalized Monday

BANGOR, Maine (AP) — Stephen King remained hospitalized Monday, but his spokesman said the best-selling author's condition was improving and that he'd been taken off of oxygen in his recovery from a bout with pneumonia.

Warren Silver, King's Bangor attorney, said he expects a "long process in terms of getting him on his feet and back to what he was before this all happened."

King was hospitalized with pneumonia Nov. 23 and underwent surgery two days later to remove fluid and scar tissue from one of his lungs.

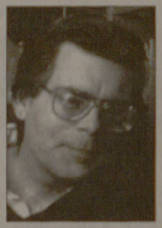
"It's a slow healing process and he's in some degree of pain from the thoracotomy," Silver said. "It's hard for him to get comfortable."

The 56-year-old writer was diagnosed with pneumonia before a recent trip to New York City to receive the National Book Foundation's 2003 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, presented Nov. 19 for lifetime achievement.

His condition worsened when he returned home to Bangor. Doctors at Eastern Maine Medical Center diagnosed him with pleural effusion, an abnormal accumulation of fluid in the membrane surrounding the lung.

Silver has said there appears to be a connection between the pneumonia and a June 1999 accident in which King was struck by a van and nearly killed while taking a walk near his summer home in Lovell. The writer suffered a broken leg and hip, a punctured lung, broken ribs and other injuries.

King, whose books include "Carrie," "The Shining" and "The Stand," is expected to make a full recovery and "is coming along," Silver said.



KING

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

Meg Ryan's role as Sally has not yet been cast, but Tod said he expected an American actress to take the part.

Best known for playing the tormented Dylan McKay on the series "Beverly Hills, 90210," Perry appeared on Broadway seasons ago in a revival of "The Rocky Horror Show." In coming the West End, he follows his former co-star, Jason Priestley, at "Friends" star Matthew Perry, who've braved the London stage-mixed reviews.

Tod said he wasn't put off by the prospect of bad notices: "If you got a great project and a great performer, then it doesn't really matter. The stage version of "When Harry Met Sally..." adapted by Marc Kahan from Nora Ephron's screenplay, is the latest in a long line of movies to have spawned stage musicals and, more recently, plays.

"The Graduate," a British theater version of the Mike Nichols film had a lengthy run on the West End and a much shorter engagement on Broadway. The hit movie "Billy Elliot" is being developed as a London stage musical to open late next year.

Lynch to christen new cruise ship

MIAMI (AP) — Former Army Pfc. Jessica Lynch will christen Carnival Cruise Lines' newest ship at Feb. 27 ceremonies in Jacksonville, the Miami-based line announced Monday.

Lynch will break a traditional bottle of champagne against the Carnival Miracle before it begins its three-day inaugural cruise from the Port of Jacksonville. She'll be named the ship's "godmother."

"We are privileged that Miss Lynch, who represents thousands of courageous American men and women serving in our armed forces, has accepted our invitation to be godmother," said Carnival President and CEO Bob Dickinson.

The former supply clerk from West Virginia suffered broken bones and other injuries when her 507th Maintenance Company was ambushed in Nasiriyah, Iraq, on March 23.

Her April 1 rescue from a hospital made her an instant celebrity, although she has disputed some of the more dramatic elements of her capture, including reports that she engaged in a fire fight with Iraqi soldiers.

Carnival will make an undisclosed contribution to the Jessica Lynch Foundation.

"Harry Met Sally" to hit London stage

LONDON (AP) — "When Harry Met Sally..." is coming to London's West End as a stage show, starring Luke Perry in the role Billy Crystal made famous in the 1989 film.

The play is scheduled to open Feb. 20 at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, producer James Tod said Monday. Preview performances begin Feb. 10. Plans are for a limited run of 16 weeks.

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