

As  
Seen In

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## Thorntons' Treeland ~ a three generation family farm

by Kelly Gates

Thorntons' Treeland was founded in 1970 when forester Glen Thornton and his wife, Nancy, decided to plant a handful of Christmas trees on their 20-acre country property in Vancouver, WA. Their goal was to earn enough income to put their four children through college one day.

According to Glen, the entire family worked in the fields planting trees, trimming, shearing and harvesting. The parents and children also worked together to keep the business running smoothly during the busy holiday season.

"All of our kids grew up on the farm," said Glen. "We planted our first trees when our oldest son was 11-years old and today, our kids are in their 40s and 50s and some of their children work here."

The first few years, most of the seedlings planted there were Douglas fir, with a few Grand fir and Noble fir also thrown into the mix to add variety. The trees soon covered around five acres of the couple's land, the only portion of the property that was naturally suited for growing perennials of any sort — the remaining 15 acres were too wet. Eventually, drain tiles were placed in the soil, effectively removing enough moisture to enable Thorntons' Treeland to cultivate a larger crop.

"By 1987, we converted to other species, planting more Noble and Grand firs than Douglas because that's what consumers were wanting," noted Glen. "Then, in 1990, we added some Fraser firs and later, we planted Norman firs too. We also bought another 20 acres, bringing our total to 40 acres." Currently, Douglas fir — the mainstay for the company nearly four decades ago — makes up around 38 percent of annual profits while Noble fir leads at 40 percent. The other types of firs represent the remaining 22 percent of business.

Each year, during the last few weeks leading up to Christmas, approximately 6000 trees are harvested from the Vancouver site. Most are purchased by customers who visit the cut-your-own tree farm to pick the perfect tree to decorate their homes for the holidays. Around 500 or so are sold to local vendors who resell the pre-cut trees at lots throughout the region.

The farm has a shaker and a baler on site to prep the firs for transportation. Workers there also offer to drill a hole into the trunk of each tree to attach a tree stand. With the stand firmly attached, customers need only turn a tree upright, remove the baling sheath and begin hanging ornaments. This is but one of the services made available, said Glen.

"We are an agri-tainment business," he said. "People come here for our trees, but we also have an old barn that has a life-sized, life-like nativity scene, an oil warmer for anyone who gets cold and we sell all sorts of craft items in our gift shop too."

Local crafters supply a wide assortment of hand-made products, but the Thorntons' don't charge a royalty for anything. The festive goods create a wonderful ambiance that is payment enough, according to Glen. The farm also stocks an array of wreaths, swags, mistletoe, Christmas tree stands and watering equipment, among other things.

After selecting and cutting a tree and browsing through the gift shop, visitors can grab a cup of hot chocolate or coffee, take a hay ride and spend time at the farm's petting zoo — a feature that is always a big hit with kids.

"We have goats, sheep, pony, a llama or two, rabbits, chickens and a donkey," Glen told *Country Folks Grower*. "None of the animals are ours though. We borrow them from neighbors who love helping us create a peaceful, fun atmosphere at the farm."

It takes around 20 employees to manage the operation during peak season. One full-time employee is on staff year round and the family hires high school and college kids in the spring and again during the summer to help with plantings and temporary tasks like shearing and mowing.

Glen and Nancy work side-by-side with employees in October, taking inventory, tagging trees and pricing them based on size and species. Their children lend a hand off and on throughout the year, returning to their roots to teach their own kids the life lessons they learned while living and working there as youngsters.

Glen hopes to always keep the business in the family. One of his sons has shown more interest than the other children and several of the grandchildren have also become heavily involved in day-to-day activities. For now, he and Nancy are now in their mid 70s and are steadily allowing employees to take on the lion's share of work.

"Nancy used to manage everything related to the barn and gift shop, but we have a very dear lady who has gradually relieved her of most of that work," said Glen. "We still own the business and are very involved though. It has allowed us to put our kids through school and is helping with our grandkids' education too."

The main concern he has for the farm's future has to do with the drain tiles that cover the majority of the property. If environmental laws ever required growers to remove them from agricultural land, Thorntons' Treeland would be reduced to growing in its original five-acre parcel. Hopefully, the agri-tainment entity won't face such a daunting dilemma. After nearly 40 years in operation, the business has become an invaluable part of the community and the legacy of three generations of Thornton family members.



Glen and Nancy Thornton on their 20-acre property in Vancouver, WA.



Grandson Jonathon Thornton helps a customer with a Christmas tree they chose.



Joseph and John Thornton have worked on their farm since they were young.

Photos courtesy of Thornton's Treeland