

OWASSO - Bill Jacobs has managed to grow 1,280 healthy trees at his Owasso Christmas Tree & Berry Farm this year, although drought did threaten to take the spirit out of the holiday season. Jacobs said he spent all summer irrigating his crop of Virginia pines, costing him plenty to ensure his trees didn't shrivel under another year of record hot summer temperatures and historically dry conditions. "Before last year we never really had to do much watering at all," he said. Evergreen trees native to more northern climates need plenty of rainfall and mild weather to thrive. Of course, the annual holiday extravaganza at Jacobs' property, which includes hay rides and a gift shop, just wouldn't be the same without fresh-cut trees. Oklahoma tree farmers continued to dwindle in number this year due to adverse weather. Only 19 fresh-cut tree farms statewide are open for business this year, six fewer than last year, according to the Oklahoma Christmas Tree Association. Northeast Oklahoma is experiencing its 10th driest year on record, with rainfall totals about 11 inches below normal, the Oklahoma Climatological Survey reports. Oklahoma as a whole is in the midst of its seventh driest year on record with just under 26 inches of precipitation during the last 365 days. Most of the state is still under extreme or exceptional drought conditions, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. Christmas tree farming is also a shrinking industry because many growers are retiring and land near cities is going up in price. Combined with the weather, only the most determined of growers remain in business. Five growers are operating in northeast Oklahoma, but only two within an hour's drive of Tulsa. Jacobs and other growers stick almost exclusively to Virginia pine varieties on their farms, although other tree species are shipped in from all over the country. Jacobs said 2012 has been his strongest for tree sales in years, noting that hundreds of customers came out before Thanksgiving to pre-tag trees that will be chopped down later. Trees prices are running about the same as last year, Jacobs said, at \$6.50 a foot for "perfect tree." The first two weekends of December are the busiest

for tree farms, growers say. Pleasant Valley Farms near Sapulpa plans to sell about 3,000 trees this year out of about 20,000 on the farm, said Annette Owens, co-owner of the farm. She said her operation, too, had to irrigate the trees this year. "Virginia pines are pretty hardy, but they still needed some water when it got real hot," she said. Owens said the farm has nearly doubled its business this year. She is unsure if the boost is from other tree farms closing or a strengthening economy. "It seems like people are still managing to afford Christmas and providing Christmas for their families," she said. Owens and her husband, Randy, rely on the Christmas tree season in addition to pumpkin sales in fall. This year they have a hayride through the farm, a gift shop and a concession stand with hamburgers and other hot food. Many families make a family trip out of the fresh-tree buying trip, Annette Owens said. "And of course Santa will be here," she said.

Area fresh-cut tree farms

Owasso Christmas Tree & Berry Farm 11039 N. 129th E. Ave., Owasso Hours: 1 to 7 p.m. Monday-Friday; 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday Pleasant Valley Farms 22350 W. 71st St., Sand Springs Hours: 9 a.m. until dark Saturday and Sunday CAL2HOMA Christmas Tree and Mum Farm Oklahoma 10 north of Gore Hours: 3:45 p.m. to dark Monday-Friday; 9 a.m. to dark Saturday and Sunday Kyle Arnold 918-581-8380 kyle.arnold@tulsaworld.com

SUBHEAD: fresh-cut christmas tree

day Remaining tree farms have great selection

Original Print Headline: Growers survive drought

Subscribe to Daily Headlines Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.