

## Growing Minds

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# GROWING MINDS

Along Highway 19 in Groveland, the Sallins' rows seem to stretch on forever—magnolia, crape myrtle, bald cy

laurel oak. Today, they're ornamental trees, but once upon a time, before the severe freezes of the early 1980s, these trees were of the citrus variety.

"We started in citrus in 1980, but we froze in '83 and again in '85," recalls Cherry Lake Tree Farm owner Michel Sallin. "We decided to diversify. We looked at blueberries, apples, peaches, grapes, and then ornamental trees. We thought that was an interesting market, so we started on a very small scale—10 acres—in November 1985."



Today the family farm—where Michel works alongside his wife, Veronique, daughters Chloe Gentry and Melanie Ressler, son Timothée, and sons-in-law Todd Gentry and David Ressler—spans some 1,100 acres and is one of the largest wholesale tree farms in the United States. They sell across the Southeast and into Texas and the Northeast, their products gracing the grounds of Universal Studios, the Dallas Cowboys stadium, and even the illustrious golf course at Augusta.

Two years ago, as in the mid-'80s before, Cherry Lake turned its attention to cultivating something new. This time around, the crop was intangible but just as promising: student awareness about the

environment through a program called The Fairchild Challenge.

"I'm a board member of the American Horticultural Society, and three years ago Caroline Lewis joined the board. She started The Fairchild Challenge," Michel explains. "She gave a presentation about the program, and I thought it was really a wonderful idea."



**A multidisciplinary, environmental** education outreach program for middle and high school students, The Fairchild Challenge was started at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables in 2002 and has since been implemented by organizations in four states as well as Costa Rica and Venezuela. The year-long competition Cherry Lake hosted this past school year featured six options for students to take part in—T-shirt design, research posters, CD cover design, photojournalism, opinion papers, and testimonials on environmental lifestyle changes.

Students at participating Lake County high schools submitted work for the options, vying for individual

recognition as well as school points for the grand prize. The top point-earning school received a \$500 grant to support its environmental program.

Sherolyn Rymal, the commercial art technology teacher at East Ridge High School in Clermont, is one of the local teachers whose students participated in the challenge. And they were on a roll this year. Her students took top honors in the first three options as well as the final option.

"They're the next generation," Sherolyn says. "This is a really good way to get high school kids involved in saving the environment."

Inside her classroom and during a break from a lively discussion about effective advertising, student Arielle Hume looked over her winning CD design entry.



show that our footprints do leave a mark. To us, they fade, but to the Earth, they don't."

Wilbert Melendez, Dominic Rudolph, and Brandon Vang worked together for four days on their winning research "Waste to Energy."

"The assignment was to research an alternative energy [that] had to do with Clermont or Lake County," Wilbert says. "It was very interesting."

"But I didn't think we were going to win," Brandon pipes in with a smile.

While Brandon says sound engineering is his first career choice and Dominic is split between accounting and art, he is on pursuing graphic design in college. Sherolyn stresses that the program at least plants a seed in students' minds about environmental issues, no matter which career path they choose.

"We're getting them to *think* about the environment," she says. "Even if they're not making major changes now, they're planting the future because they participated in The Fairchild Challenge."



Cherry Lake Tree Farm's involvement in the program is particularly unique. It is the only private business partner and a satellite partner so far; all of the other partners are non-profit organizations. Michel explains that the program is an important part of his industry to generate interest in the field.

"To run a farm efficiently, you need a lot of educated people. Many young people are not aware of the interesting and sophisticated horticulture. They think a farm is just manual labor and not sophisticated it can be. We need people with higher education in marketing, in finance—to come work for an agribusiness."

"They're about to go off to college and make career choices," says Chloe, who runs the challenge at the farm. "We felt that we had to make them aware of some other disciplines that they

are interested

about." For Sherolyn, the success of The Fairchild Challenge in local high schools is simply another achievement Lake County can claim with pride.

"It's good to be proud of it as a community," Sherolyn reflects. "There are a lot of good things going on here."

## Consider these helpful tips for proper tree planting:

1. **LOOK UP**—Stay clear of lights, buildings, or wires that could interfere with canopy growth..
2. **THE ‘HOLE’ TRUTH**—Dig a shallow, wide hole. If the soil is compacted, break it up in a large area around the tree to facilitate root growth.
3. **ROOT THEORY**—Expose the topmost root before planting the tree. Also, cut or spread out any circling or kinked roots growing up above the topmost root to prevent future strangulation of the trunk.
4. **A HOLE IN ONE**—Carefully place tree in hole. Lift the tree with straps or rope around the root ball and not by its trunk.
5. **IN TOO DEEP**—Position top root one to two inches above landscape soil. Most horticulturalists agree that it’s better to plant the tree too high than to plant it too deep.
6. **STRAIGHTEN UP AND FLY RIGHT**—View the tree from two directions perpendicular to each other to confirm the tree is straight.
7. **LEAVE NO JUNK NEAR THE TRUNK**—Remove synthetic materials. This includes string, rope, synthetic burlap, strapping, plastic, and other non-decomposing materials.
8. **SOIL & TOIL**—Add and firm backfill soil. Step firmly on the backfill soil to help stabilize the root ball. Add 10–20 gallons of water to the root ball and backfill, and then fill in any holes or depressions with additional backfill soil. Never place soil on top of the root ball.
9. **MULCH IT**—Provide a three-inch-deep layer of mulch around the tree. A thin, one-inch layer of mulch can be placed at the edge of the root ball for aesthetic reasons, but deep layers on the root ball can prevent adequate irrigation and rain from reaching roots. Never pile mulch against the trunk.
10. **A LOT AT ‘STAKE’**—Stake the tree if necessary to hold the root ball firmly in the soil. Prune to remove or reduce stems that compete with the main leader if no pruning is planned in the next couple of years.

*Source: University of Florida, IFAS Extension; ENH 1061, Edward Gilman, Laura Sadowski; edis.ifas.ufl.edu*

## Want To Know More?

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