



*Members of  
the Heater family  
are Amy, Tim, Joan,  
Jim and his wife Shirley.*

# Silver Mountain

**The Jim Heater  
Family Specialties**



**Christmas Trees  
and Angus Cattle**

by Lori Riffel

It's not a once-a-year business, in fact the business for any given year has to be planned at least 10 years in advance.

Jim and Shirley Heater and their children, Joan, Tim and Amy, own and operate Silver Mountain Christmas Trees at Sublimity, Ore., and it's no backyard job. Harvesting 150,000 trees involves a little more than the family outing to get the yearly tree.

And along with an extensive tree operation, Heaters have combined Angus cattle to produce show stock and test genetics, largely through a transplant program. The family recently hosted their state's Angus field day, and although they are relative newcomers to the Angus business—they have concentrated on the herd for less than a decade—their enthusiasm and hospitality spoke well for their interest.

# Silver Mountain Produces and Packages Quality Trees

The Heater family began in the tree business in 1968 and now has 2,000 acres in tree production. This ranks Silver Mountain as one of the top 25 Christmas tree operations in the Northwest.

Their trees are catered mainly to garden centers and to nursery outlets, as they better understand the care of cut products.

"In our case, we pride ourselves on supplying a superior tree," says Jim.

Trees are shipped all over the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii, as well as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Guam.

"We can get trees from the stump to Los Angeles in three days," Jim explains. "There's no sit-around time."

"It's a specialized business. The Northwest has the ideal climate for growing some of the best quality Christmas trees in the nation."

## More than growing trees

The Silver Mountain Christmas Tree business is as vertically integrated as it can be. The operation spans everything from picking the seed (taking cones off superior trees) through delivery to a retail lot.

"We are our own wholesaler—we sell our own trees to the retail lots," says Jim. "We own our nursery, do our own stratification and cleaning of seed, all of the shearing and planting. The only thing we do not control is the trucking, and we lease the trucking out to owner-operators."

In Oregon and Washington, five percent of the growers produce 90 percent of the trees.

"When we went into this we knew we had to be a factor in the market or there wasn't any sense of getting into it," comments Jim.

## Looking a decade ahead

When do Heaters determine what the market will be?

"We are guessing 10 years in advance when we sow our seed," explains Jim.

For example, he will elaborate, it takes Douglas fir three years in the nursery to grow a seedling which will be 24 to 30 inches high when planted. Another five years before cutting takes place in the production field, and then the cutting process (harvesting) lasts an additional three years.

"Actually, we are trying to crystal ball 11 years," says Jim. "...and the Nobel and Grand fir are slower yet."

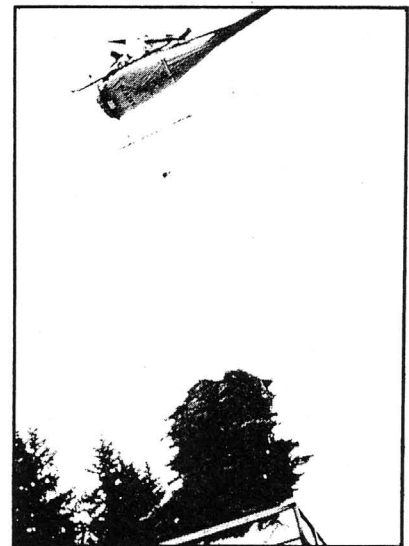
Tree varieties at Silver Mountain include the Douglas, Nobel and Grand firs, and Scotch Pine.

"We mix those percentages based on what the market is taking," says Jim. "Right now it is 60 percent Douglas, 25 percent Nobel, and the rest is Grand and pine."

The seeds are planted in the spring and stay in the seedbed two years. One million seeds are sown per acre.

When the young trees are transplanted, the number is reduced to 100,000 trees per acre; when they are planted out into the production fields, there are 1,740 trees per acre, each spaced on a five-square-foot area.

Harvesting is done in the latter part of November and into December, and lasts approximately 30 days. Trees are hand cut with a chain saw (a good cutter can cut 1,000 to 1,200 trees a day). Trees are bound into bundles of 30 trees, totalling 1,100 lb., and positioned on slings where they await helicopter pick-up to be put on trucks.



*A helicopter transports a bundle of Silver Mountain Christmas trees in a sling to an awaiting truck.*

## Innovative, enthusiastic

Trucks then haul the trees to the Heater farm center where they are counted and placed on a palatizer. The palatizer is a piece of equipment developed by Silver Mountain and is currently one of only two in the nation. It can be described best as a compacter and facilitates handling and shipping.

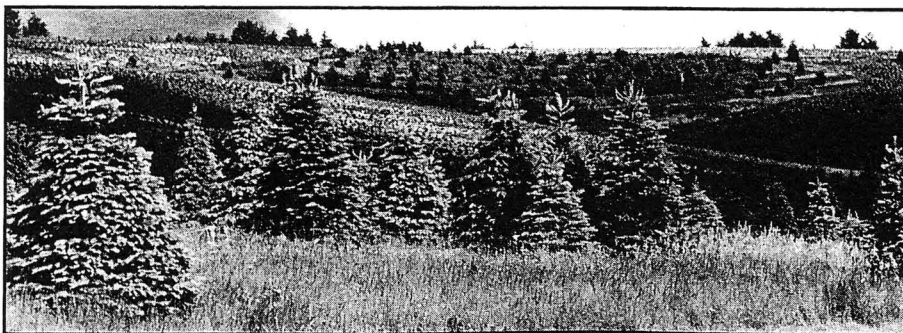
"This coming year we will ship about 150,000 trees," says Jim. A dream he shoots for is to ship 500,000 trees in one year by his 50th birthday.

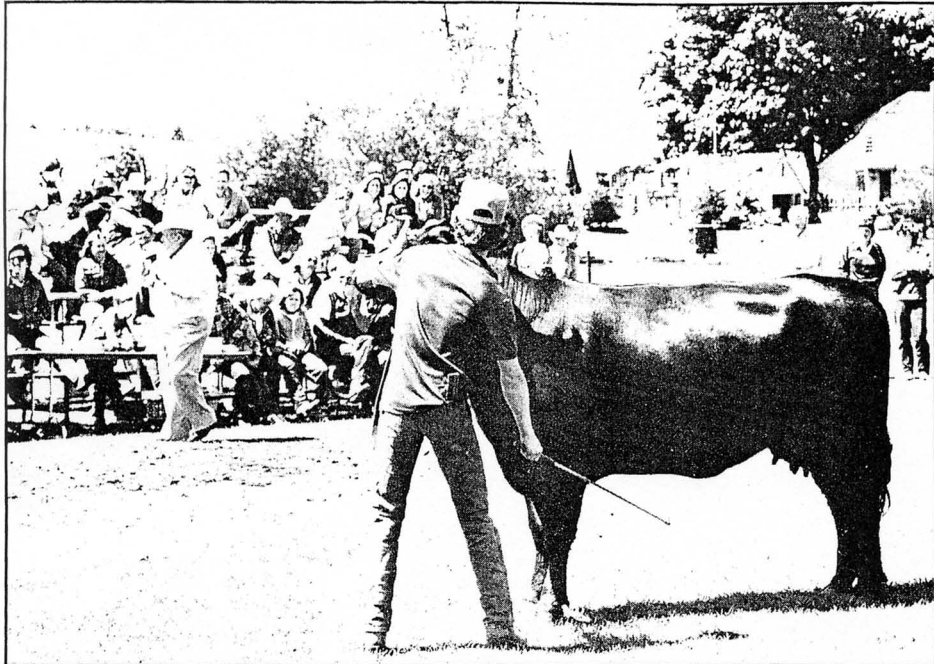
Will he do it?

With the evidence of never-ending energy, enthusiasm and business sense Jim Heater so naturally attains, it is quite possible.

Jim keeps a full-time staff of 11 people. The work force ranges between 22 and 25, and the number of employees will come close to 100 during harvest. Jim also keeps people on the road selling Silver Mountain Christmas trees.

To compliment the Christmas tree business, Heaters also operate a conifer nursery, marketing trees to the federal and state governments, other forestry operations and Christmas tree growers. A third business—initiated within the last four years—is a fruit tree nursery in which Silver Mountain produces 18 different varieties on seven different types of root stalk.





Remaining visible to industry people is an important success factor in Heater's Silver Mountain Angus. Hosting this year's Oregon Angus Field Day provided such an opportunity.

## Angus herd centers on quality, not quantity

The Silver Mountain tree business differs from some companion-industries like cattle. Angus cattle provide a family project for the Heaters.

"It's harder to have the same attachment to a field of trees as it is to a few head of cows," Jim says.

The Heaters decided in 1976 they would re-enter the Angus business and build a high quality show stock herd. Angus had been present on the 130-year-old Heater homestead for 50 years, but there had been little emphasis on the genetics of herd building.

Heaters purchased four bred cows and two open heifers for their foundation stock from the herd of Ken and Gary Grieb, Lexington, and have added to the numbers since that time. Recent purchases have included an interest in the bull Foote Acres Extra (produced by Foote Acres Angus, Melba, Idaho), and half interest in each of two Foote Acres females currently in a transplant program.

"We are not planning to be big in the cattle business, but we would like to have a high quality herd," Jim summarizes.

Silver Mountain Angus currently includes 40 head and Jim considers the

top 12 to 14 to be of show caliber. All cows in the registered program are bred artificially. The lower cut of the herd is in a club calf program and cows are bred to a percentage Chianina bull.

## Concentrating bloodlines

"If we can concentrate two or three families in the herd, we think we may have an advantage by having proven genetics that we can control," says Jim.

With close bloodlines in the herd, Jim believes the genetics of a bull can be tested more consistently. Results of changes in bloodlines of bulls are clearly illustrated in a closely related herd.

"If you have a cow family that is pretty uniform, then you definitely can see a difference using various outcross bulls. You can see how they nick with those cows," he explains.

Silver Mountain Angus plans to keep their name before the buying public with the show string on the road.

"Holding this field day also gave us the opportunity to gain exposure in front of more than 300 people," adds Jim in reference to the recent Oregon Angus Field Day.

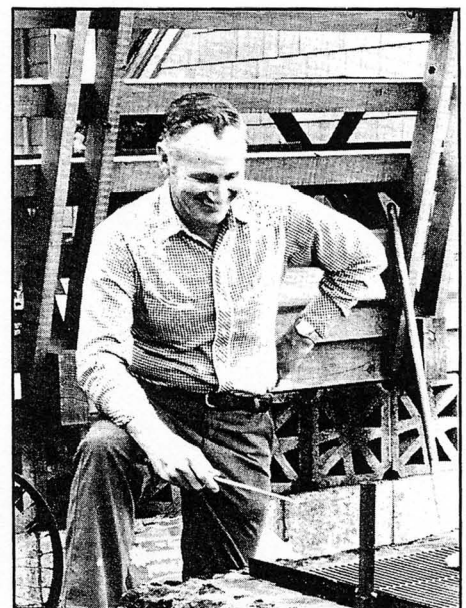
The Heater family hosted a successful state Angus field day June 29 and 30 at their ranch. Shirley Heater has plenty of culinary practice in hosting

large crowds—Heaters often entertain Christmas tree business groups, as well as sponsoring church, 4-H and other activities—and the family took many extra steps to coordinate a special event. Silver Mountain is a popular place for recreation, and Jim and Shirley keep cattlemen involved there, too, since they are beef leaders of the local 4-H club.

Joan, 21, the oldest daughter, is a senior at the University of Oregon, majoring in telecommunications. Tim, 17, plays an active part in the Silver Mountain Angus operation, assisting with herd management. He will be a senior in high school and most recently won the senior showmanship class at the Oregon field day. Amy, 11, is the youngest member of the family and is involved in 4-H with her own calf projects.

## Timing appropriate

Perhaps few so new to the Angus business would consider hosting a state-wide event. But with Jim Heater's ideas and goals, his timing was never more appropriate. Entering into a showcase spotlight of producing Angus and accommodating a large crowd of Angus enthusiasts at his ranch only makes him want to work harder at his business. **AJ**



A constant smile on Jim Heater's face shows the honesty and integrity that shines through in any business he deals with, be it Christmas trees or Angus cattle.