

## Local Grower Judged Tops In Trees: Alan Johnson, Of Concord, Credits Family For Success Of Christmas Tree Business

BY DANA GRAY Oct 4, 2019

Reluctant to take a bow for his boughs, a Concord Christmas tree grower credits his close-knit, hard-working family for tree growing and annual showing success at the Champlain Valley Fair.

Alan Johnson was recently awarded Best in Show and Best in Class for displaying a near perfect Fraser fir Christmas tree at the fair. It's not even close to the first time he's been tops in trees at the annual competition.

"If you get two in a row, that gives you bragging points inside the association," said Peter Lyon, who serves as show coordinator. "This man won three, then it was four and this year it was five. That's just unheard of. That doesn't happen."



Lyon, of Groton, was eager to praise Johnson for displaying award-winning trees at the fair.

“It’s like he doesn’t know how not to get a blue ribbon,” said Lyon. “I’m a Northeast Kingdom guy myself, so it’s a pride point for me too.”

Johnson’s Fraser entry this year scored 162 points out of a possible 165 points. By comparison, the same judges subtracted 35 points for a different tree in the contest.

Lyon credited the judges for being thorough.

“The judges (Tom and Judy Lang) are serious,” he said. “They’re very meticulous and they’re very prideful. So when you get a good mark from them it’s pretty good.”

Another Northeast Kingdom tree, grown by Claude and Chad Fontaine, of Greensboro, won People’s Choice honors.

In an interview that included Lyon, Johnson and Johnson’s daughter, Lindsay, Johnson sat quietly as Lyon praised Johnson’s skills, choosing not to brag on himself, but instead taking a moment to give credit to Lyon for his work at the annual Champlain Valley Fair Christmas tree show and competition.

“Peter, you really do take the time to set it up nice,” said Johnson. “It’s a lot of work.”

Johnson has been growing Christmas trees his entire adult life, beginning in 1981, after graduating high school.

Taking trees to the fair started when his four children were young. Johnson’s parents would go to the Rutland Fair and take their grand-kids along with some seedling trees. The family would sell trees and promote the business.

“It’s why we started showing,” said Lindsay. “It was a family thing; we all got together.”

Said Alan Johnson, “As the kids got older, I just kept doing it, carrying it on ... The older I get the more serious I think I take it.”



Lindsay said being part of the fair shows is important.

“It’s good for young kids to go and see that type of stuff,” she said. “It’s good for networking and making relationships with other people and learning about how they do things and learning from your mistakes. But it is family-oriented.”

The Johnson family’s tree business is large in acreage for growing and service area for selling. Trees are grown in Concord and on leased land in other parts of the Kingdom. Trees are sold near (Barnie’s Market in Concord) and far (Florida).

Trucks deliver Johnson’s trees all over New England and into New York as well as points further south.

Alan Johnson said on average he sells between three thousand and five thousand trees each year.

“It depends on what I plant this spring that dictates what we get eight years from now, what lives and what doesn’t live,” he said. “We have a lot of things that can slow you down, frost in the spring, drought in the spring, too much water in the spring, animal issues, deer and moose.”

He said the past spring was good for growing because the longer cold period meant the trees stayed dormant longer.

The tree business is a family affair with help from a couple of employees. Alan Johnson described the annual effort.

Spring: plant, mow, weed control, fertilize; May and June: new growth on the tree; first week in July: machetes used to shape the trees but leave the tops; mid to end of August: shape the top; September: flag the trees to harvest for sale; October: cut brush for wreaths; end of October: the harvest.

“The harvest season is what people like. It’s more fun,” said Lindsay.

Realizing that the busy harvest time is near, Alan Johnson said, “I’ve got that gut feeling again.”

His daughter replied, “It’s OK, you’ll get through.”

She then said beyond the strength of a close family, the tree business is sustained by something more.

“If it wasn’t for our faith in the good Lord we would not be able to do what we do,” said Lindsay.