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Northern Family Farms - The Next Generation

Photo of Ashley Ahl and Derek Ahl

The rolling hills near Black River Falls create a beautiful backdrop for a nursery and Christmas tree operation. And that's where you'll find Northern Family Farms, just eleven miles off the Interstate 94. In fact, the small community of Merrillan in Jackson County gets its nickname as the "Christmas Tree Village" because it is home to Wisconsin's largest Christmas tree farm.

Northern Family Farms, formerly known as Northern Christmas Trees and Nursery, has always been centered on family. It was established by Calvin and Arlene Frelk, then passed to the second generation, John and Ginger Ahl, and is now in the hands of the third generation, siblings Ashley and Derek Ahl, who are excited to take over the responsibilities of the farm. Having grown up with the family business, they like to say "it has always been a part of who we are and what we wanted to be." They feel a responsibility to carry on what their grandparents established and their parents nurtured and expanded.



The two siblings are doing just that. In August, they will be the hosts of another WCTPA convention. The previous generations hosted tree conventions in 1959, 1990, 2000 and 2007. And now it's Ashley and Derek's turn.

"We are very excited to invite you to our farm on August 10th and 11th to share ideas and experiences with you. We think many of you will be surprised to see how the farm has changed since our family hosted the convention in 2007," shares Ashley.

Founded in 1955 by brothers Calvin & George Frelk, Northern Family Farms began as a wholesale Christmas tree company. Both brothers lived in Illinois and ran an additional operation growing tomatoes and asparagus for Campbell Soup.

As both the Wisconsin and Illinois operations grew, the Frelk brothers split the business in 1972. Cal and his wife Arlene took over the growing operation in Wisconsin and George and his family stayed in Illinois. In 1979, Cal and Arlene's daughter and son-in-law, Ginger and John Ahl, entered the business. They brought a fresh perspective to the farm. John saw the nursery industry as an opportunity to rapidly expand into other farming operations.

Both couples have energized others through their leadership and involvement in American Nursery & Landscape Association, Wisconsin Nursery Association, Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association, Wisconsin Green Industry Federation, National Christmas Tree Association and American Agri-Women. Arlene and Cal were recognized for their years of dedication and service to the Real Tree industry in 2011 when they received the Christmas tree industry Lifetime Achievement Award presented by the National Christmas Tree Association.

With over 60 years of growing experience, Northern is Wisconsin's largest Christmas tree grower operating on over 7,400 acres. The farm offers Fraser and Balsam Fir, Scotch and White Pine as well as wreaths, garland and related tree lot products.

Northern has earned many accolades for Grand Champion Christmas trees and has had the honor of providing a tree to the Blue Room at the White House as well as numerous trees to Governors of Wisconsin.

Cal and Arlene felt truly blessed to have their family following up in their footsteps. In 2004 Cal wrote, "We have the best of both worlds. John and Ginger live near us, run the business and let us help out where needed. We have been able to see our grandchildren grow up and be with them. We struggled for years and finally have found better things in these branches than gold. We found a good life in a great state, a rewarding business, and our family around us in our retirement years."

John and Ginger have three children, Ashley, Lindsey and Derek. They grew up spending weekends and summers helping their parents and grandparents tend to plants. Now, Ashley and Derek have taken the helm of Northern Family Farms.

While Derek was always certain he wanted a horticulture career, Ashley took a much different path. Ashley is a graduate of the University of Michigan where she studied economics. For nearly 10 years she worked in the options trading industry, including a stint on the exchange trading floor in Chicago and later for one of the largest hedge funds in the United States. "I was determined after college to make it on my own and was not prepared to head back to the farm," she said. "It was in 2010 when my parents approached me, basically interviewed me over a dinner in Chicago, I decided it was time to come home." At the farm she works with finance, planning, market trends, and manages accounts.

Derek received a horticulture degree from the University of Minnesota and worked at another wholesale nursery and an independent garden center during school. Being away from the family business and getting experience from other green industry companies gave Derek a good perspective before starting full-time at the family farm in 2012. He makes and executes plans for all the outdoor operations. "Working in retail, I got to see how customers shop, what they want and need, and what they don't understand. It has helped us stay on top of trends like growing plants that are good for urban areas, such as more compact plants," Derek said.

Ashley admits that her time away from the family business was crucial for her. "I learned a lot. Diversification was the most important thing I learned from the trading industry. You can trade one product and probably do that pretty well but the exposure is too high. To mitigate risk, you must work in a portfolio of products." In an effort to further diversify, the company grows corn and soybeans in addition to their nursery and Christmas tree crops. Increasing corn and soybean production is also a way to hedge the labor and immigration uncertainties. The farm adopted the H2A program for seasonal labor in 2007. With the current temperature of the country regarding immigrants, it is important that we stay well-versed in the latest row crop farming techniques. "We use corn and soybeans as part of the rotation

with our Christmas tree fields. We find it cleans the fields as well as gives us time to build soil nutrients for upcoming crops of Christmas trees.

With an eye on marketing improvements, the pair helped start a Grown in Wisconsin tag and POP program for their nursery's plants. The die-cut tag reads "Grown in Wisconsin" on the front and "Locally grown from our family farm" on the back. The tags first appeared in Wisconsin independent garden centers in 2012 and customers were smitten. The retailers got a lot of good response with the tags, and there's a lot of brand loyalty from Wisconsin residents for Wisconsin-based companies.

The farm has also focused efforts on improving productivity through automation and innovation. "We are certainly not experts in ergonomics but we recognize that we pick up a lot of things below the waist and bring them to waist level to transfer or carry and put them back down again. We have made a lot of efforts to reduce bending and stooping motions," said Derek. "Through the added use of conveyors, waist-height flatbed trucks, and handled hooks we have reduced the amount of time our crews spend stooped." In 2017, the farm added a sprayer that can reach across Christmas tree blocks from the drive roads. "In additions to herbicide and pesticide applications, we're hoping to use the sprayer for fertilizer application in the spring as well. This could effectively save thousands of man hours."

The siblings respect each other's strengths, using them in ways that best suit the daily operations of the business. The transition from the second generation to the next was made as smooth as possible through clear communication, not only with their parents, but with longtime employees. "We joked that our parents were "practicing" retiring." When you think about it, it isn't as ridiculous as it sounds. Ashley continues, "Leave the younger generation in charge for a few weeks and let them practice running the business. The next time, maybe it is the whole season. Empower the next generation to take charge of a product line or a season and hold them accountable to its failure or success." Through this method, the farm has found the handoff to be by most accounts, pretty easy.

"We're lucky that our parents trust us" says Derek. "We have a very good relationship with them, we talk every day, multiple times a day, regardless if they are on the farm or not. All partners are equal," adds Derek, "and long-term decisions go through everyone."

As a young manager, Derek said he doesn't get too wrapped up in his own lofty goals. "I make sure to listen. Successful businesses are not accidents. There is so much to learn, not only from the business leaders or owners, but also from the staff that has years of experience with the company. They've seen it all and from a different angle than from the top. You can learn from everyone."

When Derek and Ashley think about what the business values the most, both agree it is the employees. "Everyone is important and respected," shares Ashley. Each employee has a purpose at Northern whether their role is in accounting, sales, growing, or mechanics. The work environment of Northern is a small business feel, but the employees are like family.

Building a successful business from the ground up is an accomplishment in itself. Building it while tirelessly working to improve and grow the industry for future generations is what this family strives to achieve. They love their industry and hope to see you at their farm this summer.



