



# From Start to Finish

Seed - Nursery stock - Trees - Wholesale - Retail - Agri-tainment

## August 24-26, 2023

## Summer CONVENTION

**Location:**

All events will be held on the farm:  
Swanson's Evergreen Nursery/ Christmas Big Red Barn  
W7484 Valerio Rd.  
Niagara WI 54151

We welcome everyone to our farm in the beautiful Northwoods of Wisconsin. This farmland has been in our family for nearly 100 years. The first evergreens were planted in 1989. Since then, we have grown and added many diverse activities.

Join us in Niagara to talk with your peers, hear from professionals, and learn more about our wholesale and retail operation.

- Seed genetics
- Transplant nursery
- Christmas tree fields
- Seed orchard
- Big Red Barn
- Coffee & Sweet Shop
- Gift Shop
- Pumkin fests
- Christmas events

Joey Swanson, Peter & Brenda Swanson



**Convention Chairmen:**

Joey Swanson  
John Grutza

**Tree Contest Chairman:**

Jon Andreas

**Farm Tour:**

Joey Swanson, Swanson's Evergreen Nursery/ Christmas Big Red Barn



Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association, Inc.  
W9833 Hogan Road, Portage, WI 53901

Ph/Fax (608)742-8663 | [info@christmastrees-wi.org](mailto:info@christmastrees-wi.org) | [www.christmastrees-wi.org](http://www.christmastrees-wi.org)

# Swanson's Evergreen Nursery

NIAGARA, Wis. — Swanson's Evergreen Nursery in rural Niagara has tapped into a trend that expands its scope beyond growing trees and aims to create an "experience" for retail customers.

Most people in the region know the business for its Swanson's Big Red Barn, W7484 Valerio Road in Niagara, a place that late in the year transforms to offer a pumpkin patch, coffee shop, rides and other attractions for the holidays.

"It's something for the surrounding communities," said Brenda Swanson, whose husband Peter and son Joey now operate the business.

This new role even has a name: "agritainment."

But their rural Niagara property didn't start that way.

The farm was established in 1989, when Peter and Brenda Swanson purchased land just south of the small northeast Wisconsin city on the Michigan

border.

They initially grew Christmas trees they sold at Storheim's restaurant in Iron Mountain, Mich., which Peter Swanson has owned and operated for 27 years.

They switched to primarily a nursery operation in 2013 when son Joey Swanson — then a high school junior — joined his father in overseeing the evergreen business.

"He knew early what he wanted to do," Brenda Swanson said of her son's career decision.

They now have 8 acres on the main site and a total of 50 plantable acres in Marinette County. It annually produces about 200,000 to 250,000 young evergreens — primarily balsam, Fraser and Canaan fir, plus white pine — grown from plugs for other farms to raise into Christmas trees. This is up from perhaps 10,000 in the early years, Joey Swanson said.

The younger Swanson also has started a seed orchard he hopes will help genetically develop

a more cold-tolerant balsam, less vulnerable to frost that can stunt their growth. He explained the fuller, more popular balsams favored for Christmas tend to be southern varieties.

"We need a tree this far north that can handle this climate better," Brenda Swanson said.

In addition, last year they produced about 750 trees of 7 to 8 feet for Christmas lots and even school fundraisers, they said.

But that all takes a back seat each fall to what they do on Valerio Road in Niagara, where they've added several buildings over the years to bring in retail customers.

It's why Swanson's Evergreen Nursery from Aug. 24-26 will host the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Summer Convention that will highlight its farm-related tourism and entertainment activities.

The "agritainment" side of the business came about after the family began selling a few of their harvest-age Christmas



trees at their Storheim's restaurant in Iron Mountain, they said. The site in later years had reindeer and Santa as well, which gave the Swansons a good indication what a more extensive holiday attraction might do.

That led to setting up the Big Red Barn, the Swansons said — though they admit to some initial misgivings on shifting to a more rural location.

"I thought, 'Nobody will come out to Niagara,'" Brenda Swanson said.

They began by updating the existing barn built earlier on the Niagara property, concentrating on creating a Christmas experience capable of luring people off U.S. 141.

"We love Christmas, so we wanted to make it magical," Peter Swanson said.

Since 2015, they've added about a building a year — a commercial kitchen, sweet shop, gift shop — primarily built by Joey and Peter Swanson.

These buildings remain shuttered much of the year while the business concentrates on its nursery work.

But come fall, the Big Red Barn springs to life for PumpkinFest, which takes place from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. every Saturday through October and now is their busiest time of the year.

"Doing the fall was the best thing we ever did," Peter Swanson said.

During that time, the Swansons have a pumpkin patch, corn maze, wagon rides pulled by a tractor, massive inflatable "jumping pillow" akin to a bounce house, a carnival-like "monster truck" ride, express train ride, pedal car track and kids' game room.

For the bakery and coffee shop, Peter Swanson cranks out apple pies, apple cider donuts, apple crisp, pumpkin pie in a cup, caramel apples, jumbo cookies, fudge, cinnamon rolls and bread — all homemade.

It's a lot of work, he said, which is why the Big Red Barn only opens for one day each week during PumpkinFest. But a typical PumpkinFest Saturday can draw in 1,000 visitors, the Swansons said. They'll hire a few people — high school students, retirees — to assist.

Christmas at The Big Red Barn begins just after Thanksgiving, with the business on Saturdays offering a restaurant open from 10:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., choose-and-cut trees, fresh-made evergreen wreathes and "kissing balls," as well as an opportunity to visit Santa in the loft. Live reindeer are on site through much of the season.

They have some Sunday hours as well through mid-December,

but with only the sweet shop and gift shop open, along with the trees and greenery available for purchase.

The business hosts Christmas parties, too, and school events.

It makes for a busy three months, but "it's just fun," Brenda Swanson said.

They acknowledge their approach may not fit other farms. Having an established restaurant in Iron Mountain made a difference, along with a ready finance source to help fund their expansions. Doing much of their own construction work kept costs down as well.

Location makes a difference, too, they said, adding they probably would do better if farther south on U.S. 141.

But other agricultural businesses don't have to invest to their extent, either, the Swansons said. They know of a few places that set up a single table or stand to sell extra merchandise during the holidays.

"It seems like each year we're getting bigger and bigger," Brenda Swanson said.

*Written by Betsy Bloom, managing editor of the Iron Mountain Daily News. P.O. Box 460 215 E. Ludington Iron Mountain, MI 49801 906-774-2772, ext. 240 bbloom@ironmountaindailynews.com*

## **Hotels in close proximity to farm**

### **AmericInn**

2005 S Stephenson Ave., Iron Mountain, MI 49801  
Phone: 906-774-1900

### **Days Inn**

2001 S. Stephenson Avenue (Highways US-2 & US-141), Iron Mountain, MI 49801  
Phone: 906-774-2181

### **Holiday Inn Express Hotel & Suites**

1535 N Stephenson Ave, Iron Mountain, MI, 49801  
Phone: 888-465-4329

### **Comfort Inn**

1565 North Stephenson Ave., Iron Mountain, MI 49801

Phone: 833-448-0930

Joey Swanson said that these are the closest hotels to the farm, and are nice ones. There are other resorts and hotels in the area which you can find online.