

Everything's coming up roses at garden center

Environmental consciousness raised along with trees, shrubs at Laughton's nursery

By Gordon B. Seavey
Staff Correspondent

On land where Westford colonists raised corn, potatoes and various staples to satisfy their limited diets many generations ago, now thousands on thousands of living evergreens, plants and trees in regimented rows are soaking up the sun and rains along Stony Brook Valley.

On two large plots long ago tilled by Taylors and Bannisters and then abandoned, Laughton's Garden Center is growing things to beautify landscapes and homes, and to save and improve the environment.

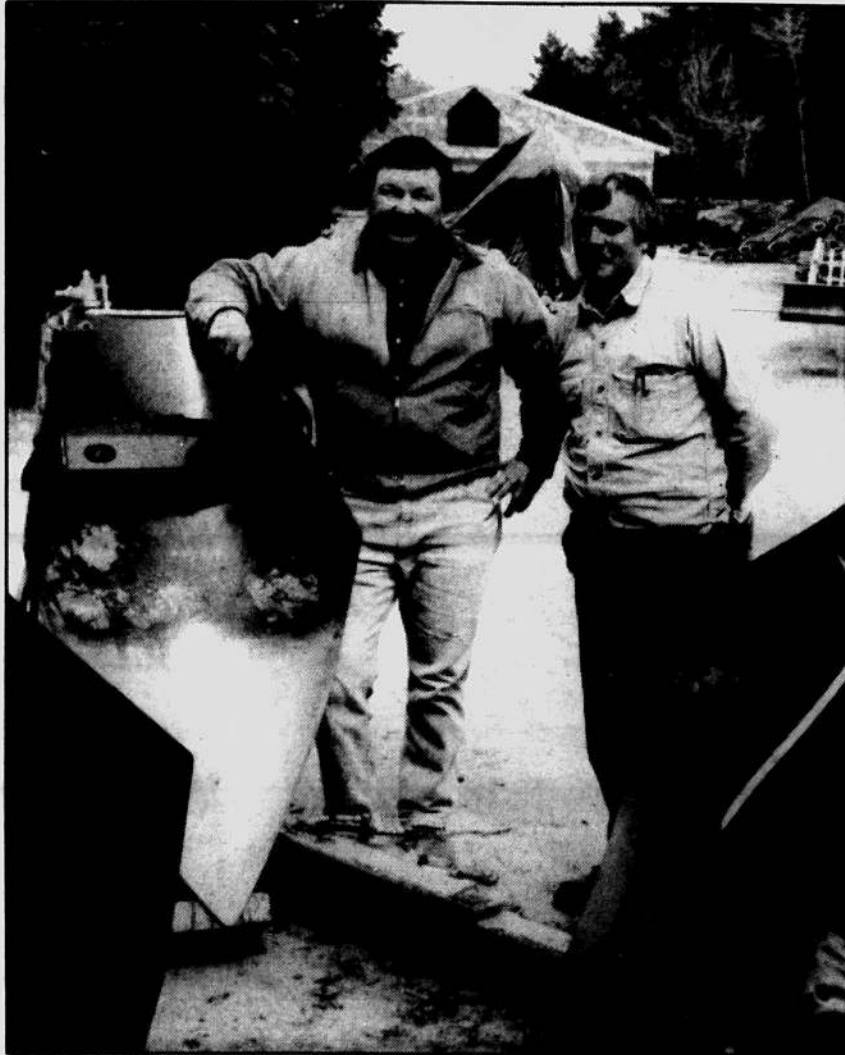
Forty-six acres of the old Rev. Frank Bannister farm at the junction of Cummings and Lowell roads, purchased 13 years ago, is the center of operations. Another growing area is at the Sam Taylor "place" on Stony Brook Road. This covers 25 acres and is located a short distance from the larger plantation.

At the headquarters of Laughton's Garden Center in North Chelmsford is another four acres devoted to display and sale of a wide variety of growing plants and nursery stock. This place was founded back in 1934 as "Cal Laughton Florist" by Courtland and Frances Laughton. It is now being managed by Charles Laughton, their son.

Located at 165 Princeton Street (corner of Richardson Road), the area once could have been part of the original extensive Richardson farm, one of the very oldest in Chelmsford. Here a new 25-acre plot has been set aside for cultivating various species of Christmas trees where families may select "just the right one" in size, shape and variety for the holiday.

Large variety of stock

Starting as a retail florist-greenhouse establishment, Laughton's now grows the largest variety of nursery stock in this region. Over



60 percent of what it sells is grown principally in Westford. The retail business is 40 percent of its sales. The balance is purchased by other nurseries, landscapers and contractors who depend on Laughton's for quality stock.

Now the largest nursery in the Merrimack Valley, Charles Laughton explains that the high value of land and high labor costs have forced many concerns of this nature out of business. He counts less than a dozen now operating in Massachusetts.

Growing plants and trees requires considerable equipment, much heavy hand labor and lots of experience. Laughton has to fight insects and fungus, weeds and drought.

For qualified labor during the growing and harvest season, Laughton must rely on some imported seasonal help, as do growers of fruit and sugar cane in other parts of the country. Recently arrived from Jamaica are eight trained field workers.

Selected back home by the West Indian Labor Organization, these workers are under the supervision of the U.S. Department of Labor. Transportation and housing are supplied by Laughton's, but the workers prefer to feed themselves.

Composting operation

Composting at Laughton's is under the guidelines of the Department of Environmental Protection. Composting certain materials, such as leaves, animal waste (ma-



Staff photo by Gordon Seavey

Row upon neat row of young shrubs and bushes soak up the sun at Laughton's Lowell Road nursery. (left) Resting alongside what appears to be the granddaddy of all garden trowels are garden center owner Charles Laughton and superintendent Eric Vanderbie. The huge shovel is part of the tree digging machine used at the nursery.

nure and bedding), adds humus to the land.

Charlie Laughton inaugurated in Westford a compost system that saves taxpayers in Westford about \$35,000 a season. For Chelmsford, this is around \$8,000, as Westford residents cart their own debris to the Lowell Road station.

To operate the program, Laughton spends an estimated \$60 a ton to process the material into useful substances. Here again, DEQE is the supervisor of the project.

It is generally understood that water is essential in the growing fields. Workers can draw water from a little pond on the Lowell Road property which holds 2 million gallons. When irrigated onto the crops, the water filters down through the earth and is eventually recycled.

The Westford nursery is working on a five-year plan for water conservation with the U.S. Soil Con-

servation Service. Completed two years ago, the first phase is estimated by the agency to save approximately one million gallons of water, which is returned to the aquifer.

Changes with the seasons

This is a seasonal business. During the spring months, some 60 workers are employed, but during the winter months, the staff is reduced to about 25. April to June is transplanting time and for digging orders from the field. Weeds are a large problem all through the growing season, as in all gardens, so July and August are primarily for field maintenance.

From September until the ground freezes, transplanting and digging again occurs. During the freeze months, general and field maintenance keeps a smaller staff occupied. While Stony Brook soil is very fertile, there are many hidden rocks. These mostly have to be removed by hand.

A practical businessman,

Charles Laughton is also civic-minded and environmentally attuned to the times. His farm is one of eight nurseries in the state to participate in a study program for integrated pest management. The aim is to use minimum environmentally-safe chemicals.

He is a director of the Farm Bureau, serves on the Water Resources Management Advisory Committee, plus several other groups pertaining to agriculture.

Laughton says operating a nursery is like any other farm work — long hours and hard manual labor.

He is quick to add, however, "I like the outdoors and nature. I hope the people of Chelmsford and Westford are as proud of our acres of open space as we are. I know Laughton's is not the largest nursery in Massachusetts... I just want it to be the best."

Gordon Seavey is an environmentalist by nature and for 20 years operated a 90-acre tree farm on Beaver Brook Road, near Forge Pond.