

# Hockleycrest's *Trees for the Trail*

WRITTEN BY DAN O'REILLY ■ PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKE DAVIS





**T'S A LONG WAY FROM ARIZONA** to a tree farm nestled away on the Niagara Escarpment in the Mono Township hills, but a Grand Canyon backpacking trip can be considered the genesis of David Moule and Sally Cohen's commitment to the Bruce Trail through the sale of Christmas trees on their farm, Hockleycrest. ►

David Moule in one of the tree plantations at Hockleycrest with Airport Road in the background.





In the 10 years from 2005 to 2015, approximately \$25,000 or \$2,500 a year has been raised at Hockleycrest for the Caledon Bruce Trail Club, one of nine clubs comprising the Bruce Trail Conservancy. Along with wreaths and planter boxes, the \$30 pesticide-free trees are sold over three or four weekends in December by a contingent of Caledon and other club volunteers who also guide purchasers to the tree plantations and help load the trees on cars. Other members help prune the trees, a rather tedious task which has to be conducted in mid June.

"This wouldn't be possible without volunteers," says David.

Asked to explain how the farm came into being, he says its history stretches back to the early 1980s, when as a Ministry of Transportation engineer, he joined a group of fellow employees planning a Grand Canyon backpacking trip.

"We thought we better get in shape," says David of the group's decision to do some preparatory hikes on the Bruce Trail.

That was his introduction to the trail and the Bruce Trail Association, now Conservancy, and he was hooked. A year later he became a part of a trail captain group tasked with rebuilding the Bruce Peninsula trail section. Eventually he proposed and later flagged

the route of the panoramic Gun Point Loop Trail overlooking Georgian Bay in Lion's Head. It had previously been an inland trail only.

On his drives to the Bruce Peninsula work parties he began spotting a particular property marked by a white gate and picket fences. "It was quite noticeable because this was the route of the 1984 tornado and there was quite a bit of damage on the other side of the road."

A few years later he met Sally at a ski club they belonged to and in 1992 they got married. Shortly afterwards he learned the property was for sale and he persuaded her they should purchase it as a weekend retreat.

### Trees Planted

After taking possession of the 75-acre property in 1993, they undertook a number of improvements to its circa-1847 log house and the land which had been denuded by years of cattle grazing. "We didn't want that, so we started growing trees," David says.

In 1994 they hand planted 1,500 trees with the help of friends. It was, Dave admits, a rather laborious endeavour, so they decided to take advantage of the Ontario Forestry Association's low-cost Project Tree Cover and had approximately 20,000 trees of various species machined planted in the following two years.

▼ David and wife Sally Cohen with some of the wreaths for sale to benefit Caledon Bruce Trail Club.





► Wreaths and greens: David with Club members David Sarginson and Louise Carberry and natural products for sale.



▼ Louise Carberry with a couple of the approximately 18 urns she helped make with eight other volunteers.







▲ Customers taking home the tree they chose and cut themselves.

▼ For those who don't want to cut their own tree in the field, there are trees ready to choose from near the barn.





“But then we started noticing all these cars with Christmas trees on their roofs coming from a tree farm just to the north of us.”

That observation was the inspiration for a successful proposal to the Caledon Bruce Trail Club in which the couple offered to allocate a section of land to the club to grow Christmas trees, eventually receiving the proceeds from future sales. Over a three-year period in the late 1990s the couple and the club volunteers planted approximately 1,200 Scotch pines.

“We just had to wait for them to grow.”

By 2005 the trees had reached the right height for cutting and selling. Initial

sales, however, didn't go well. “The trees weren't quite perfect and this really was a no-frills operation.”

### **Popular Decisions**

But sales began to improve after he erected a sign informing passersby that all proceeds would be going to the Bruce Trail Association. Word of mouth and a notice in the association's magazine also helped, he says. And the no-frills operation began morphing into one with some embellishments after David asked the club to sell hot cider and cookies.

Since the 2005 opening some changes and adjustments have had to be made to meet changing consumer tastes.

▼ The sign on Airport Road points to the weekend Christmas sales.







▲ Purchases that do good. Christmas baskets from Hockleycrest help protect the Bruce Trail.

▼ David checks the tip of a growing tree.



▲ Some families make tree cutting part of their festivities





Flagging Scotch pine sales prompted a decision to cut those trees down and plant spruce and fir trees which are now more popular and not as much work to prune.

As those trees are now just coming to maturity, there was a two-year shortfall in stock. Fortunately, club executive member and commercial tree operator Fred Somerville of Somerville Nurseries bridged that gap by selling trees to the club at a very low cost the first year and donating them the second year.

There will be an ample supply of balsam fir and white spruce on hand for this Christmas season, David points out.

Some time ago he handed over supervision of the sales and pruning to club leaders. "I don't have to be here at the farm in December. But I am still in the background if needed."

So is the rest of the family, says Sally, recently retired and with more time now to devote to the farm. "Our children have grown up with the trees," she says, pointing out that the cookies sold at the pre-Christmas sales are baked by their daughters, Lauren and Alison, who raised \$100 one year. Their son Peter also helps out with sales, pruning, and guiding purchasers to the trees.

Asked if the family ever resents the purchasers, most of

whom are strangers, tramping around on their property for three or four consecutive weekends, she says no. "This is helping the Bruce Trail and we're committed to the trail."

### **Trail Protected**

That commitment includes allowing the trail through the rear of their property, which is protected by a conservation agreement registered on title, and which will stay in place even if the property is sold.

David also serves on several Caledon Club and Bruce Trail Conservancy committees.

David and Sally's contribution draws strong praise from Caledon club president Bob Ferguson, noting the tree sales have been its major fundraising activity for several years.

"I have found an incredible level of commitment and a strong spirit of co-operation to support a common goal. Dave and Sally are examples of this, and there are many others," says Ferguson, emphasizing the critical role volunteers perform in building and maintaining the trail along the Niagara Escarpment.

The tree farm is located at 933445 Airport Road, a few km north of Highway 9. **NEV**

*Dan O'Reilly's last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was "Award-Winning Retreat In Clearview," Winter 2015-16.*