

If you look closely, the Upper Mountain Research Station in Laurel Springs is starting to take on the look of Christmas. Hundreds of tiny Frazer Fir Christmas tree seedlings are growing under the watchful eyes of research station staff.

The station is working to develop a consistent and dependable production method for Christmas tree seedlings, which may soon lead to another market for tree growers to supply, said Tracy Taylor, station superintendent.

Most Frazer Fir seedlings used to produce Christmas trees today come from out of state -- primarily Oregon and Michigan. Once the seedlings are planted here, farmer raise the trees until maturity when they are harvested and marketed to consumers. That process can take 12 or more years depending on the size of the tree desired.

The trees slow path to maturity is part of what researchers hope to be able to speed up during seedling production. Typically, a seedling can take five years to just go from a seed to the field, Taylor said.

Researchers hope to cut that time in half by producing them in a greenhouse environment where they can manipulate the light and other growing features. Currently, the research station is looking at different watering schedules, different types and amounts of fertilizer, different container types, different media types and different lime amounts. These variations can help staff pinpoint the most efficient, economical, and hopefully, speediest way of growing seedlings.

Locally-grown Christmas trees raised in a greenhouse to study various conditions that are ideal for growing in North Carolina.

If the research proves successful, seedling growers could then provide Christmas tree farmers with locally grown seedlings, Taylor said. That creates both a new option for Christmas tree farmers to source seedlings and also would mean a Christmas tree could be locally grown from start to finish.

Christmas tree fun facts: North Carolina ranks second in the country in Christmas tree production behind Oregon. At the county level, Ashe County ranks first in the country for Christmas tree production. Growers produce around 20 percent of the real Christmas trees in the country. In 2018, a North Carolina Frazer Fir was selected to go to the White House. The top five Christmas tree producing counties in North Carolina are: Ashe, Avery, Alleghany, Watauga and Jackson.