

Oxygen Factory USA

Oxygen is an element that is both produced and consumed here on Earth, and most living things have oxygen-based metabolisms. Photosynthesis is a process through which plants convert carbon dioxide and water into oxygen. So it stands to reason that the bigger the plant, the more oxygen it can make and release into our atmosphere.

The folks at Tree Town USA like to say that they manufacture trees, but they should also get credit for happily creating an abundant byproduct—oxygen. And while the company was developed as a financial opportunity, its ownership particularly liked the idea of contributing positively to Earth's ecosystem while providing a high-quality and desirable product.

Now, Tree Town USA is a national tree manufacturer that operates nearly 5,000 acres devoted to tree-farming operations. It has facilities in South and East Texas and Florida and sells more than 400 different product combinations, from 1-gallon plants all the way up to 670-gallon trees. Each operation focuses on trees that are adaptable to a specific region, and those species are then grown nearest that region. This assures that the right tree will be grown in the right market area, and ultimately saves on shipping. But, importantly, this procedure also heralds back to their business philosophy of developing a healthy plant that will be successful for the end user.

Different varieties of fruit trees, to bear consistent, good-quality fruit, must be in the right chill zone. Any number of tree varieties may survive just fine in a region, but fruiting or flowering may be minimal or nonexistent if the right living conditions are not met. Tree Town USA is all about providing superior lifetime performance, so they match their shade, flowering and fruiting trees to a specific environment to ensure the best performance.

The market for Tree Town USA is the Southeast U.S. wholesale industry, and products are sold to landscapers, local plant nurseries, mass-market chains and home-improvement box stores. But those products are developed, cared for and delivered with one thing in mind. "We focus on growing trees that will be successful in our hands, and successful for the end customer when in their hands," said Brad Abrameit, Tree Town USA director of production planning and procurement. That practice has worked very well for them since 2002, when the company was established, and throughout its expansion.

"Just like any major manufacturing business, we use projections, and we have a master plan," said Production Manager Alan Heinrich. "All of this is computerized, and we tweak projections based on market demand. We also use forecasting to ensure we will have a good plan that the market can support. And all of our salespeople need to be



TOP: Tree Town USA Director of Production Planning and Procurement Brad Abrameit
ABOVE LEFT: The view from a slope at Tree Town USA offers a rich tapestry of colors
ABOVE RIGHT: Just like any manufacturer, Tree Town USA uses regular construction e

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able to look across the entire inventory.”

Even though agricultural in nature, Tree Town USA is run like a Fortune 500 company, and the management structure is one often used in corporate environments. There is a management team as well as planning teams, crew supervisors and crewmembers, customer service positions, and jobs at all points in between.

“The company is owned by a family that values employees highly and looks for people with family values,” Abrameit said. “Horticulture, they believe, is something trainable; but core values are non-negotiable.”



stands amid some of the larger specimens that the company grows. and textures, and the various trees specimens show off their individual attributes. equipment, but with a few adaptations, to gently handle their living products.

Tree Town USA also rewards inventive thinkers even if solutions are not always high-tech. Just recently, Abrameit said, one of the field employees came up with a very simple and innovative way of using a hand tool, normally used for moving large trees, for moving smaller plants. By adapting the tool, they are now able to move many more plants at one time, saving hours of labor and reducing the stooping required.

Abrameit also explains much more about what goes into “manufacturing” a healthy tree, and it’s more involved than simply sticking an acorn in the ground.

“We are a full-range producer, and we start many of our own seeds,” he said. The company also starts all of its plants in greenhouses in Houston for a more controlled and healthy beginning, and then the employees “shift-up” the plants into larger pots. When ready, plants are transported to the company’s outdoor facilities with the environment most suited for the species to do well.

All the plants grown in Texas Tree Town USA facilities are container-grown, meaning that they will remain in pots in the field, and the nutrients and water are tailored specifically for that plant.

The company has a sophisticated computer-operated drip irrigation system, and they water based on the plant’s needs and current environment.

The system incorporates microjets that drip water into each pot, with the system minimizing runoff and water loss. Any runoff gets captured and redirected into channels that return the water to irrigation ponds for reuse. This irrigation minimizes not only water use, but also electricity demand. The company uses some overhead irrigation, but mostly for smaller trees that may need to be cooled down.

Abrameit said that irrigation is managed daily, and the company has scouts always looking for areas of the system that may need repair, measuring the water flow and manually looking at the soil ball of plants to gauge moisture content. This last process is really more of an art than a science, because the technicians are looking at and touching the plant to determine whether its moisture needs are being met.

In addition to using environmentally responsible irrigation methods, the business also focuses on prudent use of chemicals to fertilize or treat pests or disease. At times, air-flow, nutrition or moisture just needs adjustment.

“Trees are like humans,” Abrameit said. “If nutrition is out of line, they may be more prone to contract diseases.”

But when chemicals are necessary, he said, “It’s always in our best interest to manage the use and to not overuse chemicals. Many pathogens or pests can grow resistant to a particular chemical. So the tree farm tends to use the least amount to be effective, and then also to rotate our different chemicals.”

Another key element of a healthy tree is to achieve the perfect shape relative to the height and roots. A canopy and top that is overgrown will not be supported by the root system. “Bigger is not necessarily always better. Proportion is the key,” said Abrameit of the tree-growing process and to consumers picking out trees.

Industry professionals know this, and that is why they have extremely strict specifications on the caliper (trunk diameter), number of branches and general proportions for each species of tree. To achieve demanding industry standards like these, the company employs an aggressive pruning program to shape each tree to a predetermined form. When pruned properly, the branches are stronger and won't break and split, which might stress a tree and possibly invite disease. The pruned trees, grown at a controlled rate, are more structurally sound.

While Tree Town USA is a tree wholesaler and does not sell to the general public, one of its missions is to ensure that once trees are planted, they reach their full life expectancy and performance potential. And, whether it's for one of their trees or others, they offer some good advice following this year of drought.

"If you have a tree that has dropped all of its leaves," Abrameit said, "wait until the spring flush has passed before considering cutting it down."

However, after that, if leaves don't sprout, it is better to go ahead and have it cut down to avoid safety issues or potential property damage. If you already know you have a dead tree, replacing it now will allow the tree to establish itself over the next several months. Fall and winter are great times to plant trees! And he also offered a tip for keeping trees alive during drought. He said the best thing



The fieldwork at Tree Town USA is labor-intensive, but workers are always developing ways to achieve efficiencies.

to do is to turn the water on very low and let a slow drip saturate the ground, and move the hose around the tree's drip line at intervals. He said the worst thing you can do is flood an area because most of the water will just run off. A slow trickle allows the ground to absorb the water and prevents water waste while allowing the tree to take advantage of the water provided.

He also said that when establishing a tree, water it well, but don't continuously water or overwater it. Trees need to harden to the actual environment, and if you pamper it and get it used to such a lush environment, it won't necessarily do well when it misses watering, such as when you go on vacation.

For our East Texas region, some recommended varieties that perform well include red maple, bur oak, shumard oak, elm, magnolia, holly and bald cypress. Abrameit also said live oaks, though not as plentiful here, do very well in East Texas. Incidentally, they are also one of Tree Town USA's bestselling varieties of trees. "Trees, from an economic standpoint, offer landscape value, which improves home value," he said, emphasizing how trees also contribute to home energy efficiency. "In the summer, trees can provide shade for a home, reducing the cooling bill. And, if selected and placed properly, deciduous trees, or trees that shed their leaves in the fall, let the sun shine through in the winter."

As crucial as trees are to our living planet, so is a healthy economy with sustainable businesses that offer environmental benefits. Tree Town USA and its 180-plus employees are what you'd call "a growing business" with branches wide and tall. With them on the job, we can all breathe easier!

Tree Town USA is a member of Wood County Electric Cooperative, with a 1,000-plus acre facility in East Texas. To learn more about the business, visit www.treetownusa.com.



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*wishes you and yours
a joyful and richly blessed
Christmas and New Year.*

Getting Wired for Christmas? Protect Your Electronics

If you're asking Santa to leave an expensive stove, refrigerator, flat-screen TV or home-theater system under the tree, add something else to your wish list: effective surge protection.

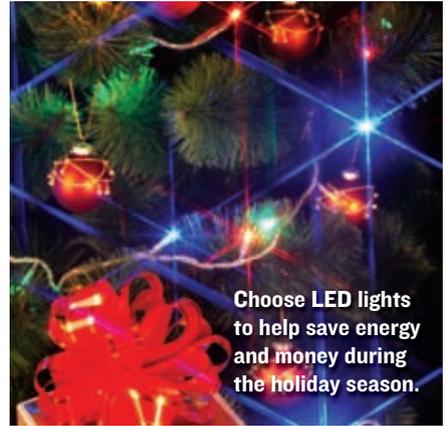
Thunderstorms, lightning strikes, minor fluctuations in the power that comes into your house or even interference generated when you turn on a hair dryer or vacuum cleaner can cause damage to electronics. Plugging them into an inexpensive power strip won't prevent any problems unless it's designed to detect even minor surges and trip the circuit breaker or sacrifice itself.

Wood County Electric Cooperative (WCEC) offers a whole-house surge protection system called SmartGuard, and it protects against external high-voltage spikes and surges. Here's how it works. After checking to be sure that a member's home is properly grounded and wired, WCEC installs a SmartGuard Surge Protection meter socket adapter (MSA) to divert power surges to the grounding system. This device is designed to reduce high voltage to a safe level before it enters a home through the meter. This product does not prevent occurrences of power interruptions or "blinks." A "blink" is not a surge, but a power interruption.

If high voltage does enter your home through the meter, subject to the warranties, damaged equipment such as refrigerators, electric stoves, electric water heaters and electric air conditioners will be warranted for repair or replacement up to \$5,000 per item and up to a total of \$50,000.

Power spikes also can enter the home through the lines that connect your phone, cable TV or satellite receiver to the house. Power protection should protect all of the lines that touch your TV, stereo, home-theater system or other expensive electronics. So WCEC also offers a variety of other add-on surge protection units to protect electronic equipment such as televisions, stereo systems and telephones.

The cost of a custom-built package can be paid out over 60 months, interest free, billed directly to your electric bill. In an area that's prone to electrical storms, it's worth investing in surge protection to avoid damage to your home's valuable equipment. Contact the SmartGuard department directly by calling (903) 763-6519 or 1-800-762-2203 or email us at jaym@wcec.org for more information or to enroll in the program.



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TOP 10

Energy-Saving Tips for a Happy Holiday Season

- 10 Shop for Energy Star-rated appliances and compact fluorescent lightbulbs.
- 9 Skip the electronics and get the kids board games.
- 8 Don't preheat your oven when cooking large pieces of meat.
- 7 Lower thermostats and replace HVAC filters every 30 days.
- 6 Check windows and doors for leaks and seal them.
- 5 Install timers on outdoor lighting displays.
- 4 Decorate inside and out with strands of lights made with light-emitting diodes (LEDs).
- 3 Adjust power settings on video game consoles to the power-saving mode.
- 2 Vanquish energy vampires with a smart power strip.
- 1 Unplug the electronics, turn down the thermostat and go on vacation.

Registration Number Required for Timber and Ag Tax Exemptions

Beginning in January 2012, Texans wanting to claim a sales tax exemption on electricity and other items used in agricultural and timber operations must provide a Texas Agriculture and Timber Exemption Registration Number. House Bill 268, passed during the 2011 legislative session, added this requirement.

The Texas comptroller's office issues the registration number, and those wanting to claim the exemption must fill out an application. Registration numbers must be renewed every four years.

Applicants can apply online at www.getreadytexas.org or request a paper application to mail in by calling 1-800-252-5555 or downloading a copy from the comptroller's website, <http://c750820.r20.cf2.rackcdn.com/ap-228.pdf>.