

# Mazon couple on a mission to save the trees

By Christina Chapman

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**MAZON**—In 10 years Jamie Thomas fears he'll be driving through town and all the mature 60-year-old trees are going to be gone due to a spreading pest. So he and his wife are doing their part now to replenish the trees.

"We need to start planting now," he said.

Becky and Jamie Thomas own and run Spring Grove Nursery in Mazon and, for the second year, they are giving away a free tree to 20 local communities in and around Grundy County.

Trees not only add beauty to a community, but also provide animal habitat, oxygen and save money by providing shade and reducing air conditioning costs, Becky said. And because some communities do not have enough money to budget for new trees annually, Spring Grove Nursery has decided to annually provide a single free tree to surrounding communities through their Green Legacy Project.

But in addition to the benefits there is also a need to replenish trees due to an exotic beetle killing millions of ash trees in the United States. It is called the Emerald Ash Borer.

"The Illinois Department of Agriculture believes it will wipe out all the ash trees in Illinois," Becky said.

Since it can't be stopped this is another reason to give away free trees, she said.

Last year the nursery gave away 13 trees and has already given away 10 this year. Becky and Jamie hope to give trees to all 20 communities. Among the towns who have already planted their trees are Morris, Mazon, Kinsman, East Brooklyn, Carbon Hill, Gardner, Verona, Diamond, South Wilmington and Dwight.

They ask that the towns contact them by Saturday for a tree. The nursery number is (815) 448-2097. The nursery will deliver the trees, but does



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Trees grow at Jamie and Becky Thomas' Spring Grove Nursery in Mazon.

not plant the trees. The trees are 2.5 to 3 inches in diameter and are currently 15 to 20 feet tall.

The first towns have received Emerald Luster Maple trees and the remaining will get Accolade Elm trees. The Accolade Elms are a new breed that are resistant to Dutch elm disease, which is spread by the elm bark beetle.

These trees usually cost about \$150 to \$200 each.

Despite the tough economy that all businesses are suffering from, the Thomases say they will continue to give away free trees every year.

"We will do this on a long term basis to continue to emphasize the importance of planting different trees. And it is a long term way to maintain the forestry population," Becky said.

The couple also does an Arbor Day program with Mazon-Verona-Kinsman Grade School every spring. For five years now they have gone to the school and taught the students about the importance of trees and planted a tree with the kids. Now when they return they look at the trees' progress during the lesson and plant another tree.

"Because the kids take part in plant-

ing the tree they learn about it and every year they can watch it grow and know they were a part of it. We hope it then sticks with them," Becky said.

With both programs Becky and Jamie think of it as a way to give back to the county they both grew up in.

"For us, since it is our business to grow trees, it's a pretty simple thing we can do and offer what we know," Becky said.

The family is fifth generation farmers in the area, but are the first in their family to raise trees.

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# SETTING DOWN ROOTS

## Students help celebrate Arbor Day

By **JEANNE MILLSAP**

Herald Correspondent

**MAZON** — Mazon-Verona-Kinsman Grade School students got their hands dirty Friday afternoon planting an Autumn Blaze Maple tree at their school in celebration of Arbor Day.

This is the fourth year Spring Grove Nursery owners Jamie and Becky Thomas have donated trees to plant at the school in celebration of Arbor Day. The couple grew up in Mazon and now their children attend M-V-K.

"We love trees and helping educate kids about trees and about why they're important to us," said Becky Thomas.

Thomas said she and her husband both attended that school as kids and have good memories of it. But most of the school's trees are older now, she said, and planting new ones now will insure a beautiful site for years to come.

For the past three years, the Thomas' have been letting their daughter's classes help plant the trees. Maggie is in fifth grade now. But this year, they thought they would give their son Joey's kindergarten class a chance to plant a tree.

M-V-K kindergarten teacher Alicia O'Keefe said her and Michelle Meyers' students were excited at helping plant the large tree. It's something they will be able to see grow from

year to year and can tell their kids in years to come that they had a hand in planting that tree.

O'Keefe said the kindergartners have been preparing for the Arbor Day celebration by studying about trees in class.

"We've been learning about what a tree can be when it grows up," O'Keefe said. "And yesterday, we read 'Franklin Grows a Tree.'"

The Thomas' came in early in the morning with crews to dig the hole behind the kindergarten classrooms on the north side of the school, and to bring the 500-pound balled and burlapped tree to school grounds.

Later in the afternoon, the Thomas' came inside the school and spoke to the kindergartners about trees. They explained why trees are good for the environment, help save electricity by shading houses, and are just beautiful things.

Then they went outside where Joey and his mother read a poem. Workers moved the tree into the hole, then the students removed the burlap and took turns shoveling in dirt.

Earlier that day, the Thomas' had driven to Lemont to help with Arbor Day celebrations at the park district there. One group, Lemont Environmental Commission, had purchased 31 trees from Spring Grove for their

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Michael Cornale and Jamie Thomas roll a 500-pound, 3-year-old autumn blaze maple tree into a hole outside MVK Elementary School in Mazon on Friday. (Herald photo/Adam Nekola)



## The Value of Trees to a Community:

- The net cooling effect of a young, healthy tree is equivalent to ten room-size air conditioners operating 20 hours a day.
- Landscaping can reduce air conditioning costs by up to 50 percent, by shading the windows and walls of a home.
- A mature tree can often have an appraised value of between \$1,000 and \$10,000.
- Landscaping, especially with trees, can increase property values as much as 20 percent.
- One acre of forest absorbs six tons of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide and puts out four tons of oxygen.
- Planting of trees means improved water quality, resulting in less runoff and erosion. This allows more recharging of the ground water supply.
- Research shows that visual exposure to settings with trees has produced significant recovery from stress within five minutes, as indicated by changes in blood pressure and muscle tension.

**Kindergartners Christopher Collett and Alma Ruiz shovel dirt around the roots of a newly-planted tree outside their school on Friday. (Herald photo/Adam Nekola)**

# Arbor Day

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own celebration. Students were there, too, Thomas said.

A national Arbor Day actually began in the treeless plains of Nebraska in 1872. Pioneers there, such as J. Sterling Morton, missed the trees of back home. Trees not only provided beauty, but they were good ways to break the harsh winds that tore through the plains, to keep hold of the soil, and to provide fuel and building materials.

They also provided shade for the hot Midwest summers.

A newspaper editor, Morton advocated tree planting in his articles and proposed a tree-planting holiday to be called Arbor Day.

It was estimated that more than a million trees were planted in Nebraska on that first Arbor Day, April 10, 1872.

Other states followed Nebraska's example, and today Arbor Day is celebrated in every state. The most common date for the celebration is the last Friday in April, but some states set their Arbor Day at other times to coincide with the best tree-planting weather.



**Kindergarten students at MVK Elementary School pose behind the tree that they helped plant on Friday in celebration of Arbor Day. (Herald photo/Adam Nekola)**