



UI Extension Forestry Information Series II

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Today's Tree Farm - NOT just for Christmas anymore

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Long before tinsel and blinking lights, Christmas decorations came from the natural world. Holly and ivy were used to decorate churches since at least the 1500s and the first written record of a decorated Christmas tree comes from Riga, Latvia in 1501. The Christmas tree was introduced to United States by German settlers in the 1800s and rapidly grew from a tabletop version to the current floor-to-ceiling size preferred today.

By 1851, native evergreen trees harvested from the forests began to be sold commercially as Christmas trees and 1901 saw the first Christmas tree farm established by W. V. McGalliard, who planted 25,000 Norway spruce on his farm in New Jersey. Currently, there are approximately 350 million Christmas trees growing on American tree farms. Real Christmas trees are a crop planted and harvested by farmers; an industry that employs 135,000 people annually.

Current markets

In 2016, The New York Post reported that one New York City tree stand sold a 13-foot-live tree for \$1,000, delivered. The 2017 holiday season will again see shortages in the real Christmas tree market with a corresponding increase in prices. Why? An overabundance of trees in the early 2000s kept prices down, and when coupled with the "Great Recession", forced many tree farmers out of the Christmas tree business. As it takes seven to nine years before the first trees planted are ready to be cut and sold, remaining tree farmers are having a hard time keeping up with demand.

A small number of new tree farms have been established in the Pacific Northwest over the past 10 years. Establishing a tree farm is not an easy task and one that is more of a life-style than a commercial



Establishing a tree farm is not an easy task and is more of a life-style than a commercial business.



Today's successful tree farm has diversified their operation to include other crops such as the blueberries and other fruits.

*Photo by Karan A. Rawlins,
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business. Those that are successful have diversified their operations to include other crops, such as pumpkins, small fruits and ornamental flowers, as well as hosting planned events. Fall harvest festivals, pumpkin hunts and wine tastings with live music are quickly followed by hot-cider and sleigh rides, wreath making and fabulous gift shops that showcase local artisans. Today's tree farm visitors experience all this and more - and yeah, get that perfect Christmas tree while there as well.

Not only are western small tree farms expanding their operations into other crops, they are also growing new varieties of Christmas trees. Some new variety traits are of interest to the grower in particular - such as increased tolerance to drought and late spring frosts, but all offer buyers exciting new trees to choose from.

New species

The most popular species of Christmas trees has remained the same for decades - the grand, noble, concolor, balsam and Fraser firs, Douglas-fir, Colorado blue and white spruce, and white and Scotch pines. Poor seed crops and undesirable traits of existing favorites, coupled with the increasing demand for new varieties, has spurred growers to plant new species. See Table 1 for a look at a few new Christmas tree varieties currently gaining popularity.



Selecting and cutting your own Christmas tree creates unforgettable memories shared with family and friends. And that is what U-cut tree farms are all about - *the experience*. To have that experience this year with your family, find a tree farm close to you by going to the following websites:

- Inland Empire Christmas Tree Association - <http://iechristmastrees.org/>
- National Christmas Tree Association - <http://www.realchristmastrees.org/All-About-Trees/Tree-Locator>



Fall harvest festivals, pumpkin hunts and wine tastings with live music are quickly followed by hot-cider and sleigh rides, wreath making and fabulous gift shops that showcase local artisans - making a visit to your local tree farm an experience the whole family will not only enjoy, but remember for years to come.

Table 1. Christmas tree varieties currently gaining popularity.



Corkbark fir.

Native to southwestern U.S., the corkbark fir looks very similar to a Colorado blue spruce, but with softer, fragrant needles and a creamy white, corky bark. With a narrow, conical shape, this gorgeous tree has good needle retention and fragrance. Supplies are limited as the corkbark fir is a slow grower with desirable characteristics extremely dependent on seed source, which is in short supply.



Canaan fir.

From the scenic Canaan Valley in West Virginia, the Canaan fir is a cross of the northern balsam fir and Fraser balsam fir. The blue-green, flattish needles are a silvery color on the underside and have good needle retention. More drought tolerant than Fraser fir, Canaan fir has a sweet and spicy fragrance and soft, lacy branches sturdy enough to support ornaments of many sizes. For those who like a Fraser fir and want to try something new, the Canaan fir is your tree.



Trojan fir.

Trojan fir is native to the mountains of western Turkey. Quickly becoming a popular Christmas tree variety because of its outstanding drought tolerance and good form, Trojan fir has soft green foliage, strong needle retention and a nice fragrance.



Serbian spruce.

Referred to as “one of the most graceful and beautiful spruces,” Serbian spruce has medium to dark green needles with two very distinct white bands on the lower surface that give the tree a silvery appearance. Though the needles only have an average retention rating, they are soft and bear a pleasant fragrance. Native to northern Europe and northern Asia, Serbian spruce makes an attractive Christmas tree with its narrow, pyramidal, spire-like shape and pendant branches that twist to show the silvery undersides of the needles, giving the tree a two-toned appearance.