

UI Extension Forestry Information Series

To Paint or Not To Paint - That is the Question!

Don White

Scotch pine is an important Christmas tree throughout the Inland Empire area, with 40% of total production in recent years. A few less are being planted each year as other species are proving their worth.

One of the problems with scotch pine is that some of the varieties of the tree tend to turn varying shades of yellow just about harvest time each fall. This variation is dependent on the geographic location of where the seed was collected.

Scotch pine is distributed in Europe from Russia and the Scandinavian countries down to countries bordering the Mediterranean. The further north the seed source, the more yellow the trees become in the fall. On the other hand the further south they grow the less frost hardy they are. Also keep in mind that trees from varying latitudes have other characteristics such as more rapid growth rate, upturned branching angles, long needles, short needles straight stems, etc. There are no seed sources containing all of the desirable characteristics.

Several growers wanted to know if they could eliminate the yellowing with the addition of nitrogen fertilizer. At our Sandpoint Research and Extension Center we had a demonstration planting with 20 scotch pine trees from seven well-distributed seed sources. These trees were 3-6 feet tall and have never been fertilized. It was a perfect opportunity to see if we were dealing with a strong genetic trait or if the yellowing could be altered with nitrogen.

A heavy dose of nitrogen was applied to one half of each row in April and the results were checked at harvest time in late November. The result was no detectable change in the yellowing of any of the trees.

Were does this leave us? It simply means unless you want to go into the fields and spray each tree with green

paint, as many growers have done in the past, you had better pick your seed source carefully.

I won't name all the specific seed sources because Spanish strains and French strains may go under several different common names depending on a particular nursery or seed dealer. I can, however, tell you that the area which gives us the best and most consistent color and a reasonable amount of frost hardiness is a band that runs through central Europe across Spain, France and Austria. Even in that geographic band there is some variation, but it is minimal. Names like Spanish Burgos, Spanish Quadrama or French blue should keep you away from the paint gun.

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About the Author: *Don White* is a former Area Extension Educator - Forestry and Professor at the University of Idaho.

