



# UI Extension Forestry Information Series II

Alternative Forest Enterprises No. 10

## Traditions

*Yvonne Barkley*



The short, dark days and long freezing nights of December are made warmer and merrier by the many traditions we keep. For thousands of years people all over the world have used plants and trees as part of their holiday celebrations; many of which come from a tree farm, nursery or forest near you.

*Deck the Halls...*

Ever wonder why we drag trees and greens, holly, ivy and poinsettias into our homes as part of our holiday traditions? It started long ago, when cultures around the world saw plants and trees that retain their leaves and needles during the winter, and seem to 'never die', as symbols of eternal life. Northern Europeans collected and placed boughs of holly over their doorways in December to "drive away the evil demons that could be heard howling in the winter wind."

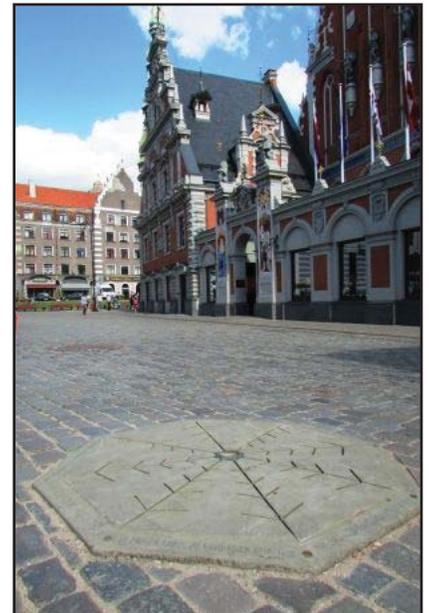
Plants were also brought indoors to freshen the air and brighten moods during the long, dreary days of winter. In the late 1880s, the poinsettia, a native plant of southern Central America and Africa, was introduced to the United States by the first American ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts



*Joel Roberts Poinsett.*

Poinsett. There are many legends about how the plant became so closely associated with Christmas, but the fact that they "flower" in the winter and are the traditional red and green colors of Christmas may be the most realist reason of any to adopt this tropical plant as a holiday favorite.

And let's not forget the Christmas tree. The year 1510 is officially recognized as the first recorded instance of a live decorated Christmas tree in the city of Riga, Latvia; a date memorialized by a plaque in the town square.



By the second half of the 19th century, Christmas trees had become a common feature in many British and American homes, a tradition started by Queen Victoria and her German husband, Prince Albert. Today, 20 to 30 million real Christmas trees are sold each year to Americans as part of their Christmas traditions.

*With boughs of holly...*

Fresh materials gathered from our nation's forests have long been used for holiday decorations. The early 1900s saw the increased use of holly, ivy, mistletoe and evergreen boughs to make Christmas wreaths, roping, swags and sprays. These nontimber

forest products were soon joined by other materials from forest and fields, including branches from manzanita, red osier dogwood, willow and birch, as well as a wide variety of dried plants, nuts, cones, bark and mosses – a wide palette of natural materials to inspire an artisan’s creativity.

Plant species used for decorative greenery include pine, fir, spruce, Douglas-fir, cedar, mountain laurel, boxwood, ivy, grapevines, juniper, holly, eucalyptus and magnolia leaves. Today, the most common finished greenery products are Christmas wreaths and roping. Other finished greenery products include door swags, garlands, center pieces, kissing balls and boxwood trees.

*Tis the Season to be Jolly...*

Holiday greenery production is a multi-million dollar industry. For example, in the five-county Grayson Highlands region of Virginia and North Carolina, nearly 50 producers employ 2,000 people each year to produce finished greenery products, with an estimated worth of 20 million dollars annually. The greenery industry in this region has been growing 15 percent a year and is centered on white pine wreath and roping production. The growth and success of the greenery industry is especially impressive considering that the production season is squeezed into the later three months of the year, from mid-October through late-December.

There are over 400 species of holly, with the English green and variegated being the most popular. Many native hollies have been destroyed by over-cutting wild holly, with little concern for tree health. In the last few decades, holly orchards have been developed

in the Pacific Northwest, where English holly grows well, as well as in the Southeast where American holly or other varieties of holly thrive. Some of the better-managed holly orchards have reported yields of up to 3,000 lb./acre/year; with a retail price around \$5.75/lb. that’s over \$17,000 per acre.



No flower says Christmas more than a bright, beautiful poinsettia. There are more than 100 varieties of poinsettias available today, but red is still the customer favorite. Poinsettias are the bestselling potted plant in both the United States and Canada, contributing \$250 million to the U.S. economy at the retail level, most of which is sold in the six-week period leading up to the holidays. In 2015, California is the biggest wholesale producer of potted poinsettias, followed by North Carolina and Florida.

There are close to 35,000 farms growing Christmas trees in the United States; farms that employ over 350,000 people. Common conifer species grown for Christmas trees include white and scotch pines, Norway, white, and Colorado blue spruce, Douglas-fir, and grand, Nobel, Fraser, balsam, and concolor fir. Twenty seven million Christmas trees were sold nationwide last year (2016), with 81% being sold as pre-cut trees. The remaining 19% of those Christmas trees were cut down by families themselves. In 2010, Idaho growers earned \$596,000 for cut Christmas trees alone, with the total dollars spent on live Christmas trees nationwide in 2011 totaling a whopping \$1.07 billion dollars. Now that’s a lot to be jolly about!

*Fa-la-la-la-la...*

Whether it’s a fragrant tree that you go and cut yourselves, a cheery red poinsettia on the table or an elegant garland of boughs welcoming family and friends through your door, a part of all of our holiday traditions include something from a nearby tree farm, nursery or forest close to you.



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