



Tree Line



New Hampshire-Vermont Christmas Tree Association

January 2018

Special points of interest:

◆ Trading Post

WANTED: Tree baler wanted. Need a 14-inch round metal baler. An Internet search does not show any currently manufactured. Do not want a hexagonal fiberglass unit. My welder works fine, so one in need of repair is OK. Contact Russell Reay, russreay@vermontel.net or call 802-492-3323.

◆ Upcoming Meetings

The Summer 2018 meeting will be at the NH State Nursery in Boscawen on Saturday, June 23.

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Winter Meeting at Vermont Farm Show

The Winter meeting of the NHVTCTA will be held on Tuesday, Jan. 30, at the Champlain Valley Fairgrounds in Essex Jct., Vermont, in conjunction with the Vermont Farm Show.

Also, don't forget to bring a tree and/or wreath to enter in the Vermont Farm Show competition. It is good exposure for the industry as a whole and a good marketing opportunity for individual farms!

The agenda includes the annual group discussion of the past sales season for choose-and-cut, retail and wholesale.

The Vermont Secretary of Agriculture had hoped to join us but a scheduling conflict means he won't be there. So we will begin with a presentation by Ann Hazelrigg, director of UVM Extension's Plant Diagnostic Clinic, on "Diseases and Pests of Christmas Trees." We will then hear from a representative at the Christmas Tree Promotion Board about activities that took place during the 2017 season to promote real Christmas trees, as well as other topics related to the Promotion Board.

After a lunch (stuffed chicken breast, tossed salad, veggies, bread, red potatoes...and pie for dessert), the



afternoon session will include a talk about the ins and outs of farm insurance from Kevin Bourdon with Co-operative Insurance.

We will conclude by covering another important business topic: payroll issues, including seasonal employees, contractors vs. employees, and how a payroll company can reduce your liability and simplify things for you. This presentation will be given by Paul Trahan of Workforce Solutions.

Registration for the meeting is available on-site if you have not already sent in your registration form.

Contact Jim Horst at (802) 447-0660 with questions or for more information.

President's Message

As I begin my term as president of the NH-VT Christmas Tree Association, I'd like to thank a few people.

First, thanks to Dan Beloin for his service to the association through not one but two terms as president. He put in much work, and I'm sure will continue to do so, especially with his organizing efforts at the Big E.

And thanks also to Tom Lang, who was elected to serve as president but put the needs of the association first and reluctantly stepped aside for health reasons. We're fortunate that Tom has continued serving the association as a director, and as his friend and neighbor it's great to see that he's doing well and still working hard out in his trees.

Thanks also to Jim Horst, who really is the one who keeps the NHVTCTA organized and rolling along.

Finally, thanks to the many members of the association who have willingly shared their expertise and experiences over the years. When someone asks me about getting into Christmas

tree farming, I tell them the first thing they should do is to join this association.

It's been nearly 40 years since I planted my first Christmas tree with my father on the small farm where I grew up. Through middle and high school I worked on a number of larger Christmas tree farms in southern Vermont. They say that when you don't know what to do, you should do what you know. So when my wife and I purchased a house with an open field 15 years ago, I talked her into planting Christmas trees. And the first thing I did was to join this association.

Just as the species of Christmas trees has changed over the years (I remember shearing scotch pine and Douglas fir), the marketplace has also changed. Facing down competition from artificial trees and harnessing the power of social media are just some of the issues that I'll do my best to help the association address as we move forward.

I hope to see you at the Winter meeting.

*Patrick White,
President*



New Hampshire-Vermont Christmas Tree Association



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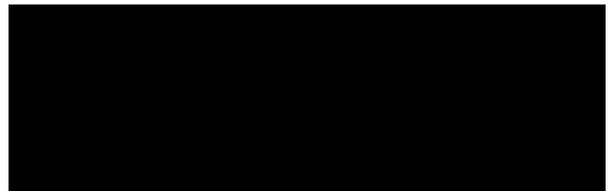
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Copies of the Association bylaws and policies are available to members at any time by contacting the Executive Secretary.



NHVTCTA News Roundup

Meeting Help Needed

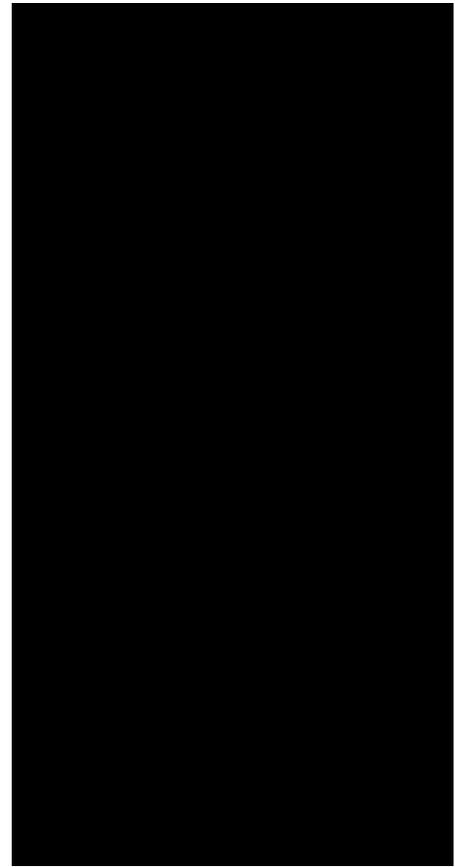
If you'd be interested in helping plan NHVTCTA meetings, please email Patrick White pwhitevt@aol.com. We're looking for someone to help pick topics, find speakers, coordinate with host farms, etc. You'd have plenty of help, but we need someone to help lead the effort.

We're also open to new topics to cover at meetings. If there's something about growing Christmas trees that you'd like to learn more about, chances are others would like to learn more too, so let us know what subjects you'd like to see at meetings. If you're willing to host a Summer or Fall meeting, or you have a topic idea, contact Patrick White, pwhitevt@aol.com

In Remembrance

Phyllis (Carle) Ahrens, 87, of Simsbury, Conn., passed away on October 9, 2017, while enjoying a visit with family in California. Phyl was a wonderfully supportive wife to the late Dr. John F. Ahrens for nearly 60 years, a devoted mother, mother-in-law, grandmother, and great-grandmother, and a kindhearted, witty, and faithful friend.

She and her late husband John stayed busy traveling back and forth between their Christmas tree farms in Connecticut and in Northern Vermont. She loved knitting and creating hand-crafts for others. Donations may be made to Old Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church in Simsbury, Conn., in her memory.



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Phytophthora and Christmas Tree Planting Trends

The following is excerpted from an article by Martin Petersson, John Frampton and Jill Sidebottom that appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of Tree Planters' Notes, published by the U.S. Forest Service. The article can be read in its entirety online. While it reports on Fraser fir cultivation and how Phytophthora root rot has influenced planting practices in North Carolina and surrounding states, much of the information should also be of interest to growers in the Northeast.

The Southern Appalachian Mountains are home to the attractive Fraser fir that began to be cultivated for Christmas trees in the 1950s. Since the 1960s, however, Phytophthora root rot has been a problem for Christmas tree production in this region.

Even though most growers have shifted from using locally produced bareroot seedlings to out-of-state-grown planting stock, Phytophthora root rot continues to have a major impact on Fraser fir plantations, and new *Phytophthora* species have recently been found on Fraser fir.

Emergence and Spread of Phytophthora Root Rot

As Fraser fir planting in the region expanded during the 1960s and 1970s, growers began to recognize a number of disease and insect problems. Particularly challenging was *Phytophthora* root rot, a disease first reported on Fraser fir in 1963 on nursery seedlings in Penrose, N.C.

Phytophthora are fungus-like organisms belonging to the class Oomycetes (water molds). *P. cinnamomi* is exotic to the re-

gion, originating from Southeast Asia, where it was first described from cinnamon plants in Sumatra (Zentmyer 1988). It is believed to have been brought into the United States through southern ports during the 1800s or earlier on exotic plants destined for gardens of antebellum estates.

Phytophthora root rot affects all sizes and ages of Fraser fir. Symptoms include flagging of lower branches, stem cankers or cambial lesions with distinct borders, foliar chlorosis, reddening or browning of needles, diminished growth, and wilting of new growth, as well as darkened, sloughing, and necrotic roots. Dying roots and girdling stem infections result in decreased water and nutrient translocation and often lead to a weakened tree and eventual death.

Phytophthora species can rapidly spread in saturated and waterlogged soils or by splashing rain, subsurface water flow, and run-off water. Heavy rains and flooding conditions accelerate the spread. In addition to water movement, *Phytophthora* species can be introduced into new fields by infected planting stock, contaminated agricultural tools, vehicle tires, field workers' shoes, and animals. In nurseries, *Phytophthora* species can infect all plants if the irrigation water is taken from contaminated streams or surface water and not sterilized or filtered prior to use. Irrigation and rain can splash contaminated soil from one infected seedling onto surrounding seedlings, which may also become infected. In the nursery, seedlings experience optimal conditions (i.e., they grow in

well-drained, nutritive soils, under optimal temperature), and therefore may be less prone to display disease symptoms, especially when dormant. Furthermore, fungicides do not always kill *Phytophthora* species, so that diseased plants are often not recognized until they have been lifted and planted in the field.

Two investigations of the incidence of *Phytophthora* root rot in Fraser fir Christmas tree plantations in North Carolina suggest that this disease is common in the region. The first study was conducted in 1972 and average disease incidence due to *P. cinnamomi* in 14 Fraser fir plantations in 5 counties in western North Carolina was reported to be 9.6 percent (range = <1 to 90 percent). In a more recent study, conducted in 1997 and 1998, the average disease incidence was similar (9 percent; range = 0 to 75 percent) in 58 Fraser fir plantations sampled in the same 5 western North Carolina counties. As in the earlier survey, all isolates from the field sites were identified as *P. cinnamomi*, except for one isolate of an unidentified *Phytophthora* species. In the more recent study, nursery transplant beds were also sampled and had a mean disease incidence of 2 percent (range = 0 to 12 percent). In addition to *P. cinnamomi*, *P. cactorum* Schröeter, *P. dreschleri* Tucker, and an unidentified *Phytophthora* species were found on Fraser fir seedlings sampled in the nursery transplant beds. In 2014, another study conducted across the Southern Appalachian region revealed that the diversity of *Phytophthora*

Phytophthora

species in Fraser fir Christmas tree plantations had increased. Six *Phytophthora* species were isolated from infected roots sampled from 82 sites in 13 counties (North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia).

Fraser Fir Planting Stock

As regional Christmas tree growers became more knowledgeable about the distribution and occurrence of *Phytophthora* root rot, they wanted to reduce the risk associated with contaminating clean fields with diseased planting stock. Growers gradually stopped producing their own planting stock or buying from local sources and began to import out-of-state sources of planting stock. Often seed was pro-

vided to the contracted out-of-state grower.

In spring 2015, a survey was conducted at five different Christmas tree grower meetings in western North Carolina to determine how many growers use out-of-state Fraser fir seedlings and for how long they have done so. A total of 89 growers from 13 counties took the survey.

Twenty-two of the growers had Christmas tree farms in more than one county, resulting in 123 farms from North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia included in the survey. Of the growers surveyed, approximately 88 percent reported that they had *Phytophthora* root rot causing mortality in their Christmas tree fields. That is approxi-

mately 18 percent higher than what was reported in the 2006 *North Carolina Christmas Tree Pest Management Survey*.

On average, 64 percent of all growers surveyed were using out-of-state material, with larger scale growers more likely to do so. About 83 percent of the surveyed growers with more than 50 acres of Christmas tree production were using out-of-state Fraser fir planting stock and 46 percent of these growers were purchasing seedlings from more than one state. The out-of-state Fraser fir planting stock was bought from Oregon (41.2 percent), Washington (18.6 percent), Pennsylvania (17.5 percent),

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Phytophthora

Continued from page 5

Michigan (17.5 percent), and Maine (5.2 percent). Clearly, a variety of locations produce the out-of-state material being planted in the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

Of the growers using out-of-state Fraser fir planting stock, 30 percent perceived an increased incidence of *Phytophthora* root rot in their fields since they began using out-of-state material, 47 percent said that the incidence of *Phytophthora* root rot had not changed, and 18 percent said that the incidence had decreased in their plantations.

Although there is evidence that this exotic pathogen had previously been introduced into the region, undoubtedly the industry has contributed to its spread, especially through the movement of infested plant material. Once infested, land remains unsuitable for Fraser fir cultivation indefinitely. As Christmas tree growers understood the problem, they shifted toward importing out-of-state material to reduce the risk of contaminating sites with *Phytophthora* species. Despite pursuing this strategy, *Phytophthora* root rot remains a menace to the regional Fraser fir industry.

Of particular concern is the increased risk of introducing new *Phytophthora* species via importation of seedlings from nurseries where containerized plants have been transplanted into outdoor beds. Most *Phytophthora* species are harmful plant pathogens that can cause serious and unpredictable, eco-

logical and economic damage when they are introduced to a new environment.

Regions from which Fraser fir planting stock is imported (the Pacific Northwest, Great Lakes, and Northeast) are known to have different *Phytophthora* species afflicting fir, including *P. cryptogea*.

Christmas tree growers must be watchful to detect symptomatic plant material prior to and after planting. Symptomatic seedlings should be discarded; the cost of planting stock is inconsequential compared to the cost of losing Fraser fir production on a site due to the introduction of *Phytophthora* species. Today, suspect plant material can be evaluated with easy-to-use kits designed for rapid field-diagnosis of *Phytophthora* species. The North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service has been training regional Christmas tree growers on how to use these kits. Symptomatic seedlings may also be sent to a plant disease clinic for further verification and possible *Phytophthora* species identification. Growers must also employ good

sanitation practices to prevent *Phytophthora* species spread from infested areas via equipment, vehicles, boots, water drainage, and other means.

Recently, a number of regional Christmas tree growers have begun greenhouse production of containerized Fraser fir seedlings. This movement is in its infancy and involves much experimentation with cultural aspects such as media, containers, lights, irrigation, etc. The results have been variable but some attempts are clearly on the path to achieve economically viable production systems. These efforts are encouraging and may provide a route to minimize the introduction of additional *Phytophthora* species to the region while also providing local income and reducing the cost of planting stock.

P. cinnamomi.

There is a need to evaluate the resistance of alternative Christmas tree species to the newly found *Phytophthora* species, as well as to develop *Phytophthora*-resistant Fraser, either via genetic engineering or a hybridization and backcross program.

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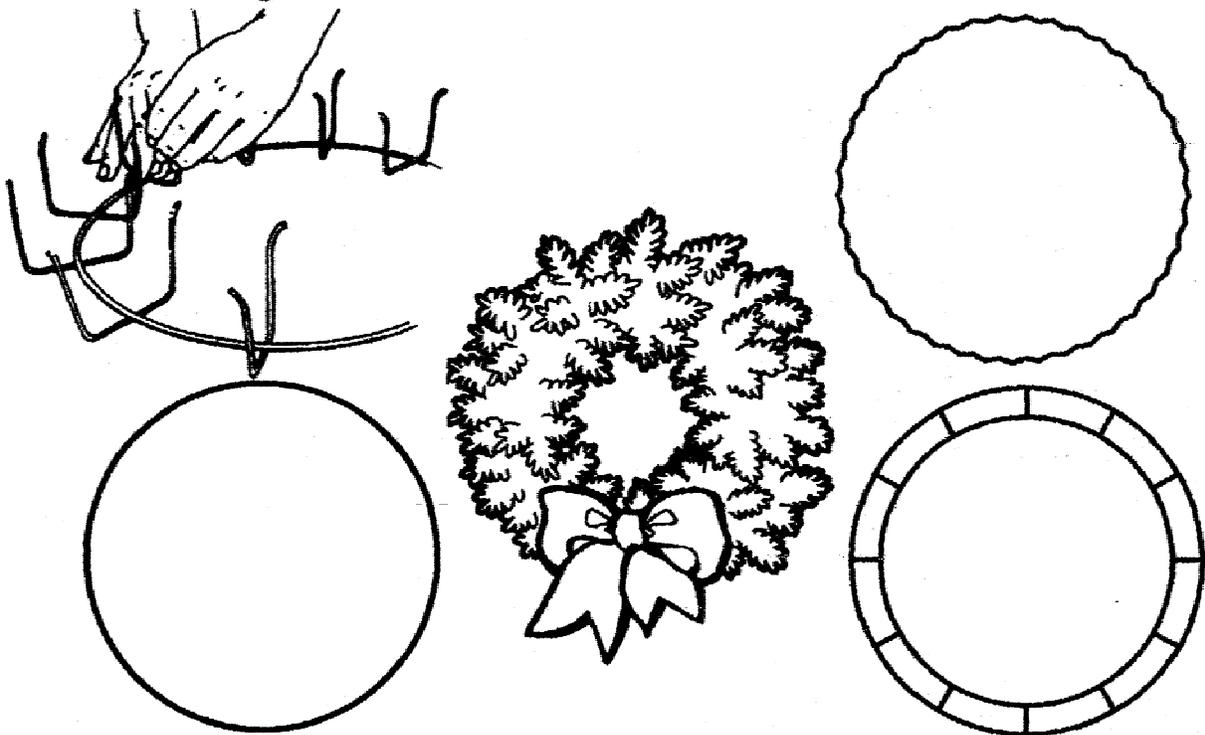
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Christmas Trees in the News

There was plenty of national news coverage this past season on “The Shortage of Christmas Trees.”

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* helped kick-start additional coverage across the country. NPR, for example, reported that:

If you usually ring in the holiday with a freshly cut evergreen, your reality this Christmas could very well be a scrawny Charlie Brown tree instead — or you may wind up paying more for a lush Fraser fir.

This year, there is a tree shortage. Most growers blame the tightened supply on the Great Recession, says Valerie Bauerlein, who covered the story for The Wall Street Journal. A decade ago, “we were in a global economic malaise,” Bauerlein tells NPR’s Michel Martin. “And Christmas tree growers couldn’t sell the trees that they had cut, and for the price that they had in them, so then they planted less.”

Christmas trees, as magical as they might seem, are still an agricultural crop. “Trees grow about a foot a year,” Bauerlein says. “So eight, 10 years later, there’s a shortage. There’s more demand [now] because the economy’s prospering. And there are fewer trees to meet that demand.” The total acreage in production has dropped at least 30 percent since the early 2000s, she says.

There is also been a movement of growers exiting the business. In recent years, “you also saw a lot of dropout of growers themselves, especially smaller

growers, in western North Carolina — one of the main producers” of trees, Bauerlein says.

“You’re also seeing fewer growers and [less] acreage in Oregon, which is the biggest producer; they account for about 30 percent of the market.” A lot of growers in Oregon are turning to grapes for wine and, a smaller number, to cannabis amid the booming marijuana industry, she says.

The cost of a Christmas tree has more than doubled since 2008, according to data from the National Christmas Tree Association; last year, the average retail value for a fresh-cut tree was \$74.70.

TreeHugger.com reported that the tree shortage may last for a long time:

If you had difficulty finding a Christmas tree this year, or had to pay through the nose in order to obtain one, you’re not alone. A widespread Christmas tree shortage is afflicting the United States, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, where tree growers are short about 1.5 million trees this year and unable to meet demand.

An article in The Atlantic explains what’s going on. The problem can be traced back to 20 years ago, when “overzealous planting” led to a bumper crop of fir trees ready to be harvested in the mid-2000s. But that turned out to be the Great Recession, when many Americans were tightening their purse strings and not in the market for live Christmas trees. The results were catastrophic for tree-growers in Oregon and Wash-

ington states, although those in Michigan and North Carolina have felt it, too.

Says Tim O’Connor, the executive director of the National Christmas Tree Association: “Prices fell off the roof and growers were losing money, so they didn’t have the incentive — and in some cases they didn’t have the equity — to invest in planting seedlings.”

Now it has been another 10 years since too-few trees were planted, and both buyers and retailers are feeling the squeeze. There just aren’t enough trees to go around, and those that are available are marked up significantly.

The challenge is felt most acutely by small-scale, independent nurseries and vendors, which do not have the large contracts with Christmas tree farms that big box stores, such as Lowe’s, Home Depot, Walmart, and Costco, hash out years in advance. Those big businesses are the first to receive their set numbers of trees, whereas the smaller businesses are forced to shop around and increase prices.

Some stories also looked at the declining number of tree farms. WOSU in Ohio, for instance, reported on one farm that is closing, Dale Tree Farm, as an example of the larger issue:

What’s happening at Dale Tree Farm is playing out around the state. The Ohio Christmas Tree Association reports about 160 growers exist today in the state—that’s down 20 percent, or 40 growers, from a decade ago.

Christmas Tree Promotion Board in the News

A Dec. 21, 2017, article on capitalpress.com (excerpts below, the extensive article can be found online in its entirety), discusses the future of the Christmas Tree Promotion Board:

The board was launched by USDA in 2015 at the request of farmers who wanted to raise funds for industry promotions and research.... Unlike the young consumers who are targeted by its promotional campaigns, some farmers who pay for the program are indifferent to social media. This year, the board invested \$1.1 million in promotions. "All these social media things they're doing, I don't have a clue," said Bob Schaefer, manager of Noble Mountain Tree Farm near Salem, Ore.

The question is whether farmers will be supportive of continuing to pay for a promo-

tional strategy that some may find confusing or unfamiliar.

The answer will be provided next year, when Christmas tree farmers across the U.S. will vote whether to retain the program. Despite his apathy toward social media, Schaefer said he recognizes the program's value because the Millennial generation — people born between 1978 and 1998 — consumes information differently.

"They don't read newspapers or watch TV," he said.

Retailers have told Schaefer the promotional campaign is ineffective, which is important if real Christmas trees are to remain a viable retail item, he said. "If they can't sell the trees, it's going to trickle down to the farmer," Schaefer said.

Generally, it appears that farmers who are part of the

Christmas tree industry support the checkoff and are excited to see their crop promoted, said Tim O'Connor, the board's executive director. Regardless of the potential generational disconnect over social media, some growers object to the checkoff for philosophical reasons.

Robert Brown, a Christmas tree grower in New York, said he's comfortable with promoting his own business over social media but doesn't like the idea of a mandatory program.

Farmers who support the program see such arguments as short-sighted. Promoting the Christmas tree industry as a whole — rather than farmers promoting themselves individually — is necessary to keep the crop relevant in consumers' minds, according to checkoff supporters.



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