



## NCCTA Retailer Newsletter



Fall 2004

### Welcome!

The North Carolina Christmas Tree Association's 335 grower members are proud to give you the 2004 edition of our Retailer Newsletter. Our members grow the best Christmas tree in the nation, North Carolina Fraser fir, The Perfect Christmas tree! North Carolina Fraser fir has been judged the Nation's best by the National Christmas Tree Association at more biennial competitions than any other species. In fact, a North Carolina Fraser fir won the tree contest in 2004 and a North Carolina grower will be taking a tree to the White House once again in 2005.

North Carolina grown Fraser firs have that perfect Christmas tree shape, beautiful soft blue-green foliage, pleasing aroma, sturdy branches for the heaviest of ornaments, and incomparable needle retention. The needles stay on the tree, not on your lot or your customers' carpets! With proper care, North Carolina Fraser fir can still be fresh when your customers take their tree down after Christmas.

In this newsletter you will find merchandising tips, consumer tree care information, sources of point-of-sale information, thought-provoking commentary, and much more! We hope you find this information useful.



### Working with Your Grower for Increased Sales

Growers and retailers share a mutually dependent relationship as they each work to provide consumers with high quality Christmas trees. Retailers depend on growers for fresh trees of the quality and grade they paid for. Growers depend on retailers to maintain tree quality until the trees are sold with the hope that satisfied customers will come back next year.

If consumers have positive experiences both on the retail lot and with the product, it translates into increased sales for all of us. If sales are good, the retailer and grower will, in all likelihood, develop a long-term relationship. There are a number of ways we can work together to make that relationship more profitable.

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#### Ask your supplier about value-added products

- ◆ Wreaths
- ◆ Garlands
- ◆ Tabletop Christmas trees
- ◆ Other quality Fraser fir products

## Retail Lot Calendar

### Winter

- ◆ Review customer demographics for target area
- ◆ Review local and state laws (Permits, right-of-ways, signage)
- ◆ Identify potential lot sites
- ◆ Identify & contact landowners
- ◆ Identify possible charity partners

### Spring

- ◆ Initial contact with tree suppliers
- ◆ Sign lease with landowner
- ◆ Develop or review business plan
- ◆ Secure pre-approval for financing

### Summer

- ◆ Make a deposit on tree order
- ◆ Identify sources for:
  - Freight
  - Liability insurance
  - Local bank account
  - Tent rental
  - Port-a-johns
  - Fencing if needed
  - Lodging / camper
  - Security
  - Utilities
  - Telephone

### Early Fall

- ◆ Touch base with:
  - Landowner
  - Tree grower / supplier
  - Charity partner
- ◆ Advertise for employees

### October

- ◆ Finalize all contracts & permits
- ◆ Hire employees
- ◆ Order uniforms, jackets, or t-shirts
- ◆ Order point-of-sale materials

### Early November

- ◆ Finalize tree delivery
- ◆ Set up retail lot, storage, & display
- ◆ Review inventory & accounting systems
- ◆ Review parking & traffic flow
- ◆ Initiate advertising

### Mid / Late November

- ◆ Train & motivate employees
- ◆ Properly store & display trees
- ◆ Monitor inventory & cash
- ◆ Survey customer satisfaction
- ◆ Visit competing lots in target area

### December

- ◆ Maintain quality of inventory & service
- ◆ Cull dry trees – Do not sell at bargain prices
- ◆ Conduct employee exit interviews
- ◆ Make deposit on site for next year

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Just like any other important relationship, communication is key. Both parties should be clear about their expectations and the details that need to be planned. Numbers of trees by grade and size, delivery dates, transportation, deposit and full payment dates all need to be spelled out. It doesn't hurt to have it in writing or even formalized as a contract.

Be sure to talk about contingencies that could arise such as winter weather or transportation problems. Don't wait until the middle of harvest season when growers are already in crisis management to change your order. Planning is so much easier if it is done ahead of time. A farm visit can give you a chance to talk through a lot of this and see the trees in person.

Growers know their product. Rely on them for good educational information about the trees they grow and how to keep them fresh. Most will tell you to keep the trees in the shade and watered. Many will encourage you to

order your trees in multiple deliveries so the trees can be cut later and stored on the farm in cool mountain conditions longer. Most growers have connections with trucking firms that can get the trees to you in the freshest condition. Many growers operate or have operated retail lots, so they know a lot about that end of the business too.

Retailers have a unique connection to the consumer. You know what they bought. Surveys sponsored by the National Christmas Tree Association tell us that consumers want convenience, less mess, less weight, a product that holds up well (is fresh), and one that is environmentally friendly. Use a written survey or card, a suggestion box, or an informal exit interview to find out what customers really think. Ask about tree quality, freshness, tree species mix, customer service, or other needs that they have. Share this information with your grower so that he can also adjust his practices to meet your customers' needs. Find out what makes your customers come back year after year.

For most customers, the closest they come to a Christmas tree farm is the row of trees on your retail lot. Give them the best possible experience. For some customers that will mean convenience. For others, make it feel like a traditional Christmas. For all of them, make sure the real tree you sell them is in the best possible condition. Shake your trees to dislodge needles that naturally shed each fall. Use tree bags or netting. Be sure to make a fresh cut on that tree trunk before it leaves the lot. Do what it takes to make the Christmas tree buying experience exciting, convenient, and full of tradition.

Always remember, Christmas tree growers are depending on you and your employees to represent them favorably to the individuals who buy your (and their) trees.

### *Points to Cover with your Grower*

- ◆ Tree sizes by grade
- ◆ Payment options
- ◆ Shipping dates
- ◆ Height standards
- ◆ Grade standards
- ◆ Presence of handles
- ◆ Tree shaking
- ◆ Transportation
- ◆ Contingencies
- ◆ Wreaths & roping
- ◆ Tree care literature
- ◆ NCCTA retail materials

## Editorial

The Real Christmas Tree Industry in the United States has reached a critical time in our history. Statistical data gathered on behalf of the National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA) reinforce what many of us have already seen in our individual areas. Since 1990, sales of fresh trees have declined from over 35 million to less than 23 million, while use of artificial trees, as a percentage of trees displayed, has grown from 50 to 70 percent. Perhaps most disturbingly, the number of households displaying no tree at all has grown from 21 to 32 percent. Our traditional customers are aging and newer generations are adopting different traditions. Why are consumers no longer putting up a tree? According to the NCTA survey, frequently mentioned reasons included home alone or no kids, not home for Christmas, too messy or too much trouble, and religious reasons. What can we as growers and retailers do about this trend? For starters we can do all that is in our power to make sure that our customers have a positive experience with their real tree each and every season.

### Food for thought

A customer's level of satisfaction with (and future buying decisions for) their real tree is not determined by what they take in and set up in the house after Thanksgiving, but rather what they take down and carry out of their house after Christmas.

The traditional argument has been that we as growers have no control over what happens to our trees after they go on the truck, and as retailers we have said that we have no control over what happens after they leave our lots. These arguments

have a certain amount of validity, in that we cannot control what happens. Here in North Carolina, however, we believe that it is time to start taking responsibility for educating our retail customers, the final consumers, and ourselves on the best ways to take care of real trees at every level in order to make the real tree experience one that every family wants to repeat. On page 6 of this newsletter, you will find a listing of promotional and educational materials, available through your NCCTA grower/supplier, that will help educate your workers and your customers on the best ways to handle and enjoy North Carolina Fraser Fir the Perfect Christmas Tree.

The North Carolina Christmas Tree Association also encourages you to support your own local and state Christmas tree associations and to support the National Christmas Tree Association. Check them out on the web at [www.realchristmastrees.org](http://www.realchristmastrees.org).

The North Carolina Christmas Tree Association and our member growers are committed to growing, harvesting, and handling our trees to provide our customers with the freshest and finest Fraser fir possible. We are also committed to providing our customers with the best information available on handling, storage, displaying and promotion for North Carolina Fraser fir. Perhaps most important is information for the end user on how to have the safest and most positive experience. Again, check with your North Carolina Fraser fir supplier on how to get these materials.

Once again we want to offer our sincerest gratitude for your interest in North Carolina Fraser fir, the Perfect Christmas tree!



Ideal storage: Upright trees under shade with trunks in water (black plastic, used carpet, & wood frame pools).



Ideal display: Irrigation and tree stands with water bowls maintain the freshness of displayed trees.

# Your North Carolina Fraser Fir Christmas Tree: A Long Journey Home

Jeffrey H. Owen, Area Christmas Tree  
Extension Specialist, NC State University

While it might be enough to enjoy the full shape, soft texture, and woody aroma of your North Carolina Fraser fir this holiday season, you might appreciate it even more if you knew just what went into the making of a “perfect” Christmas tree. The tree displayed on your retail lot is the culmination of more than 17 years of planning and effort on the part of a Christmas tree grower. For a Fraser fir to become a Christmas tree, it must be visited, treated, or worked more than 150 times over its life.

The journey from seed to tree began in 1990 on one of the highest mountain tops in the Southern Appalachians. The bulk of Fraser fir seed has been collected from the native stands on Roan Mountain. Weather conditions favor the development of a good cone crop only once every 5 to 7 years.

In good years, growers collect Fraser fir cones by the bushel in late summer from the tops of 40 foot tall trees using cherry picker platforms or bucket trucks. Once picked, the cones are dried over several months. The seed is then cleaned from the cones. A bushel of cones yields 2 or 3 pounds of seed with about 60,000 seed per pound. While that may sound like a lot of trees, germination is often so low that a pound will only produce six thousand seedlings. When properly dried, seed can be frozen for many years. This allows nursery growers to sow seed every year even though a good cone crop may not occur but once in 5 years.

Nurserymen begin preparing seed the winter before the beds are to be sown. The seed are cold-treated to insure adequate germination. Nursery beds are tilled and built up to improve drainage. Sown beds



must be mulched, irrigated, and covered with shade cloth. After one year, the seedlings are only one inch tall. After three years, they will reach about 8 inches in height, still too small to go to the field.

Growers lift seedlings from their nursery beds and transplant them into line-out beds where they can still be watered and protected. Set at wide spacing in the tilled and fertilized soil, the seedlings grow more roots and stronger branches. Typically, after two years in a line-out bed, the plants, now called liners or transplants, are ready to go to the field. The transplants are 12 to 18 inches tall, well branched and covered with buds.

Most growers plant in early spring after soils dry out enough to work. Preparation often began the previous summer, after the land was cleared. Growers may have to cut trees, mow brush, spray herbicides, apply and disk in lime and fertilizer, and possibly sow a ground cover to prepare the site. On steep mountain slopes, all work has to be done by hand. Transplants are often set with a mechanical planter pulled by a four-wheel drive tractor, but the transplants still have to be “heeled” into place by foot. Most growers set about 1600 trees to an acre.

If the land is properly prepared before planting, little additional care may be needed the first year in the field. The first year in the field can be an anxious time for the grower. Young trees can easily be harmed by drought, grub damage to roots, or root rot. Even healthy trees may not grow much until roots become established in the second or third year.

Once trees are established and start to grow, a rhythm develops over the course of a season. Trees are fertilized and limed according to soil analysis reports. Bands along the tree rows are treated with a herbicide to control weed competition. Weeds between the rows are suppressed by low rates of herbicides. Trees are scouted regularly to determine if pesticides need to be used. In early summer, the trees are shaped. Initially, only the tops may need pruning, but as trees gets older their sides are sheared with a long knife. Many growers do the majority of work alone or with their families. There is enough to keep busy all year.

As summer progresses into fall, focus shifts more to the market trees. Growers show buyers their trees. Additional fertilizers may be applied to improve

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tree color. Growers continue to scout their fields for pests. Where problems develop beyond acceptable thresholds treatment must follow. Growers also prepare for harvest by building tree storage areas, setting up irrigation, and checking equipment. Everything must be ready for the onset of harvest in November.

Harvest happens over 3 to 6 weeks. Trees are cut, carried from the field, baled by machine, and hauled to a storage area. Trees are sorted by size. From the storage area, trees are lifted into trucks using an elevator. Most trees are handled 6 or 7 times from being cut to being loaded onto a tractor trailer.

Most trees go directly to the retail lots where they will be sold, but some go first to re-wholesalers who distribute them to their own customers. Most retailers store their trees in protected locations prior to display. Many Fraser fir trees have their trunk handle trimmed on the retail lot where the branches can be used to make wreaths. The short trip from the display area to the roof or trunk of a customer's car is the last leg of a long journey.

So as you sell your North Carolina Fraser fir, the perfect Christmas tree, remember what a labor of love that tree represents. Its beauty has been created for your use by a farmer. The farmer already has a five-year-old transplant ready to go back into the spot where it was cut. The journey from seed to tree continues in the next crop, cycling through the seasons with the same promise that the evergreen holds for the Christmas Holiday.

### Tree Care Implications from the 2003 Christmas Tree Freshness Survey

In December of 2003, NC State University faculty traveled to Christmas tree retailers in the Raleigh, NC, and Fort Lauderdale, FL, areas to evaluate tree care practices and foliage moisture content. Information on vendor type, tree species, delivery date, storage and display conditions, irrigation frequency, shade type, and stand type were evaluated.

On the average, trees were fresh enough to take up water when displayed in the home. However, vendors that did not provide adequate care were more likely to have critically dry trees that might not take up water very well. Even high end retailers had problem trees if they did not water them. Irrigation

*Fresh*  
**NORTH CAROLINA FRASER FIR**  
*The Perfect Christmas Tree*  
*... The key to satisfied customers*

**Keep your trees shaded**  
Store trees in a shaded area. The North or East side of a building may work well too. Awnings, lath houses, or shade cloth structures may be used if natural shade is unavailable. Do not leave baled trees in full sun.

**Store trees upright**  
Trees stored standing up have less exposure to sunlight and lose less water.

**Keep your trees moist**  
Store trees upright on wet sawdust or mulch to help retain water. Mist stored trees periodically to reduce temperature and minimize moisture loss.

**Display trees in shade, and/or water**  
Trees displayed this way lose far less water and stay fresh.

**Put a fresh cut on the stump for your customer**  
This will insure that the tree will take up water.

**Provide customers with tree care information**

Visit us on the web: [www.ncchristmastrees.com](http://www.ncchristmastrees.com)

Christmas Tree Association  
North Carolina Christmas Tree Association

Retailer Tree Care Poster

frequency in both storage and display were the critical factors in maintaining consistent freshness in the sites we visited. Adequate shade, use of tree stands with water bowls, and the scheduling of multiple delivery dates were other important factors in the freshness of Christmas trees on the retail lot.

**Providing the right conditions for freshness cannot be over-emphasized.**

The importance of well-trained and motivated employees became apparent in the course of the survey. Several retailers used their tents, shade cloth, irrigation systems, or tree stands ineffectively. It was obvious where employees had been trained to keep trees fresh and where employees were merely taught to move product. Managers need to emphasize the connection between time spent watering today and future sales to satisfied customers.

Retailers with the freshest trees put together the best package of tree care: a good grower, multiple deliveries, shade, irrigation, wind protection, and good employees.

## POINT of SALE MATERIALS

Available from Your  
NC Tree Supplier

- ◆ North Carolina Fraser Fir 3'X6' Banner – “We proudly feature North Carolina Fraser Fir – the Perfect Christmas Tree”
- ◆ Weather-proof sign 9"X12" – same text as banner
- ◆ Tree Care Poster for Retailer (also available for your printer in Spanish)
- ◆ Tree Care Pads for Consumers (English and Spanish) – 50 sheets per pad
- ◆ Real Tree Brochures
- ◆ Consumer Brochures
- ◆ North Carolina Fraser Fir Attribute Sign (Available for your printer in English and Spanish)

## Tree Grade Standards

We get many questions every year about grade standards for Christmas trees. A thorough discussion of these standards would take more space than this newsletter allows. These voluntary standards may be found on the Internet at the following locations:

For the United States Department of Agriculture Standards for Christmas Trees: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/standards/christtr.pdf>

For the American Standard for Nursery Stock, as published by the American Nursery and Landscape Association: <http://www.anla.org/applications/Documents/Docs/ANLStandard2004.pdf>

If you don't have access to the internet, or need more information, feel free to contact the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services at 828-253-1691 ext. 13, or by email at [bill.glenn@ncmail.net](mailto:bill.glenn@ncmail.net).



Making the fresh cut: Cutting as little as 1/2 inch off the base of the tree will greatly improve water uptake.

Consumer Tree Care Poster



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Courtesy of Your NC Christmas Tree Supplier