

News & Views from Christmas 2017

Reports suggest that across all sales outlets nationwide, the number of trees sold to the public was at best static, and more likely below 2016 levels, although still ahead of 2015 sales. Heavy snowfalls on the 10th December undoubtedly accounted for lost sales, but retailers in more Southerly parts of England unaffected by snow also reported poorer than expected results.

Most growers reported turnover levels similar to 2016, reflecting strong sales of stands and ancillary items such as decorations and wreaths, and also a much higher than expected demand for more expensive larger 7-8' trees.

Many garden centres who based their buying on an ongoing upward trend from 2016 sales were left with unsold stock, particularly in the smaller sizes. This experience is likely to fuel an already growing need for a more flexible wholesale supply offer with in-season top-up deliveries.

A significant reduction in demand for 5-6' trees was evident, whilst demand for larger sizes proved exceptionally high. Customers often tell us they want their tree to touch the ceiling!

Cut-price promotional offers on 6' trees from volume retailers seeking to drive foot-fall were very much in evidence. Prices of £10.99 for spruce and £19.99 for Nordmann were common, but not supported by significantly lower supplier prices, leading to the assumption these offers formed part of a marketing strategy at the expense of margin.

November sales continue to grow and very few trees sold after the 17th December.

Very difficult to find customers for standard quality trees, and far fewer pop-up sites selling cut-price standard / second grade. Some creative marketing by garden centres promoted 'Scandinavian Style' more 'open' trees at lower prices. Our own experience is that consumers know what they want and are willing to pay for it. Generally it isn't a more 'Open' Nordmann, but one that is 'Full at the top'.

Grower retailers and particularly 'Choose & Cut' growers continue to thrive. Our own sales were another 12-13% up, similar to the previous season. Provision of adequate dry parking and to a lesser extent, covered sales areas are often discussed as constraints to growth, with many growers continuing to invest in site improvements. Facebook and similar social media platforms are becoming an increasingly popular means for communicating with existing customers and for driving new business. A swift positive response to any complaints is extremely important.

We are hearing from a number of retail sellers whose sales of Norway Spruce have notably declined. This is a real shame as our experience is freshly harvested trees or those with a short supply chain can perform almost as well as firs, providing the obligatory disc is cut off the trunk and the tree displayed in water. If you don't offer the service already, we urge retailers to do the disc cutting for every customer as a service, at the same time reminding them to display the tree in a water holding stand. It's amazing just how many homes don't possess a decent wood saw!

Most industry sources are reporting that the much discussed surge of surplus production across Europe is a thing of the past and that supplies of quality trees in the popular larger domestic sizes are likely to be below demand. Already some Danish based wholesalers have improved their offer to growers in order to secure supplies of quality trees for 2018. Pressures appear to be building for some tangible increase in wholesale Nordmann prices, particularly for good quality trees 1.75m and over.

Major wholesale growers in all countries are encountering problems with the logistics of delivering such large volumes of trees over an ever-shortening period as demanded by volume buyers. Good reliable contract labour is becoming more expensive and difficult to find. Adverse weather conditions can undermine the best-laid plans. There are rumours of wholesalers seeking a revision of supply contracts, and again the subject of 'split' or phased deliveries is being proposed.

For all Nordmann growers, maximising the yield of premium quality trees is becoming ever-more critical. Assuming basics such as weed control and fertilisation are done well, the single most important factor controlling quality is effective leader control. In our experience it is also the one thing generally done poorly! For a long time we have been promoting the idea of using Top-Stop Nippers post bud burst, in conjunction with hormone solutions applied by roller. Gradually we have increased the number of 'Nips' according to greater tree vigour and in recent years we have established that even those vigorous trees can be brought under control with larger numbers of 'Nips' followed by sequential applications of hormone during periods of maximum leader elongation. Some Danish growers we visited this Summer were using this regime with up to four applications of hormone to reduce cell extension rates, followed by a final application of a new product called ConShape from Valent Biosciences at 20-25cm extension to halt further cell division. Their results were amazingly good! ConShape is unfortunately not yet available in the UK and its use is not permitted. There is a possibility that it may be cleared for UK use in 2019.

In the UK, growers can expect best results using TopStop Nippers followed by Cerone spray, although both may be used independently of the other, albeit with reduced effect. We are restricted by law to using one application of Cerone at 7.5ml per litre of water. This must be applied by a directed spray to the leader when 10-15cm tall. BCTGA trials have found that Cerone sprayed in this way was more effective than when applied by roller. No clearance exists for Cerone application by roller. We suggest careful nozzle choice to achieve optimal coverage. 'Even-Fan' nozzles green or yellow should be fitted to your sprayer for directed cerone application at approximately 5 ml per tree. TopStop Nippers are distributed in the UK by Snowbird. An excellent video clip by Lars Geil demonstrating the use of TopStop nippers can be found on YouTube by entering 'TopStop Nipper' in the search box.

Species and stocks on offer for Spring 2018

Canaan Fir: No stock available for 2018 planting, but we are taking forward orders for our 2+1 crop available Spring 2019.

Colorado White Fir: No stock available for 2018 and 2019, but the exciting news is that after a wait of at least ten years, in Spring 2020 we will have plants from the outstanding seed origin 'Swift's Silver'. Worth the wait!

Fraser Fir: Perhaps now the third most popular UK species behind Nordmann Fir & Norway Spruce. Sought after because it offers a more slender alternative to Nordmann with good needle-retention. Will only grow on very free-draining and sandy sites. Our 2+2 UK grown plants are exceptional quality with very controlled leader extension. We chose not to list 2+1 stock from Denmark as they are poor value for money when compared with the quality UK trees.

Korean Fir: An alternative to Nordmann Fir, but only really suitable for the more fertile well-drained sites. Our Danish grown plants are very strong and a good 2+2 grade at 20-30cm.

Arizona Corkbark Fir: A beautiful blue slow-growing fir that is very early flushing and can be susceptible to frost damage in early years. Makes a spectacular tree in the right conditions, generally on fertile slopes with good air and water drainage. The plants we have this year are well balanced 2+1's at 15-30 cm.

Nordmann Fir: Now firmly established as the most popular Christmas tree in the UK, with 80% plus market share. This species tolerates a wide range of soil conditions, but avoid poorly drained or compacted sites. It always establishes faster when planted in well fertilised and cultivated soils. If unable to cultivate, consider planting with an auger to improve soil structure. Our Nordmann plants have grown exceptionally well this year. The UK grown contract crop is graded 12-25 cm with very good root-collar diameter and root growth. We have a number of different Danish stocks available with both seed orchard and wild seed collected origins. As a general guide, retail growers are advised to plant Georgian Ambrolauri wild collections, either 2+1 or 2+2. When machine planting in good soils where uniformity and early vigour are important, we recommend 3/0 Ambrolauri 'A10' and FP.1100 Bredal Skov. Larger wholesale growers are encouraged to plant two or three different origins or provenances in order to establish the best type for their particular growing conditions.

Noble Fir: Not as widely planted in recent years as it will only thrive on sandy or shaley soils in areas of higher than average rainfall. Noble Fir is perhaps the finest Christmas tree you can have in the home, but is frustratingly difficult to grow. Often overlooked as a tree for growing in pots, which is unfortunate as it is arguably an easier species to grow than Nordmann and Fraser in above-ground pot production. Demand for noble foliage, which is cut from older trees is steadily increasing as supplies from Germany and Denmark are dwindling. If you have the soils and the space, a foliage orchard could make a good long term investment.

Norway Spruce: Once the 'standard' UK Christmas tree, a place now taken by Nordmann which is significantly more resilient in the wholesale supply chain. In common with many other 'Choose & Cut' growers, it accounts for up to 40% of our sales, but as we already commented in our 'New & Views' sales are reducing quite rapidly. We recommend retail growers still plant 20% Norway as needle retention for freshly harvested trees displayed in water-holding stands is very good.

Our preferred provenance is from the French Jura region and this year we have excellent supplies of 2+1 and 2+2 stock. For most customers 20-40 cm is ideal, but for machine planting we have made a special 20-25 cm 2+2 grade. If a slightly taller tree is required, we have some nice Danish grown 30-50 cm from Lundbaek seed orchard. Our selected potting grade grown at high altitude are as good as ever and should be first choice for pot production. This year they are from a good German Black Forest seed source.

Serbian Spruce: Usually planted sparingly by retail growers to add interest and choice. Also a popular species for pot-grown production. We offer two distinct types, a German seed collection with characteristic slender growth habit and early cone production, (spruce cones remain intact after harvest for a distinctive effect). Our Danish 2+2 Djursland seed orchard stock has a more conical growth habit and is recommended for potting and field production. It responds well to shearing and is shaped more like Norway Spruce. Both have striking silver colour to the undersides of the needles.

Colorado Blue Spruce: A popular tree for retail growers as it looks very attractive in plantations. Not widely grown for wholesale sale, but a good choice for planting in pots. We offer three seed origins. Kaibab is a standard choice for field planting with a number of very blue trees in the mix, but also quite a few greens. We recommend 'Misty Blue' for field and pot production. It is a more consistent grey blue colour with fewer bright blue 'shiners', but also very few of the less desirable green trees. For a consistent premium bright blue colour, choose the Canadian seed orchard stock, 'Baby Blue'. This season, in addition to our usual jumbo plugs, we have some amazing plug + 2 plants, expensive, but highly recommended as they are likely to save you three growing years.

Lodgepole Pine: Good on wetter peaty or mineral soils, does not do well on clay. Nice sturdy 2+1 plants.