

News & Views 2016

At about this time last year I wrote that we had enjoyed a successful 2014 Christmas season and that we sold more trees than ever. I am happy to report a similar situation in 2015 and in common with many smaller growers, we enjoyed a modest single figure percentage increase despite some atrocious wet weather over our key weekends. Our greater use of facebook appears to have driven a lot of new customers to our site and we have finally decided that the £5-600 we pay each year to the local press is a complete waste of time!

Every year we seem to discover a new 'Elephant in the room' affecting the overall UK market. Last year I wrote at some length about the perceived 'wave' of over-production that threatened to de-stabilise prices. Indeed, mostly in urban areas we saw significant numbers of new sellers offering cheap 'standard' quality trees, many of which failed to find a buyer. A similar fate befell many garden centres that failed to pass on modest wholesale price reductions and continued to charge in excess of sixty pounds for a normal domestic tree. Overall though I believe trees sold nationally were a similar volume to 2014.

1 Growers should adopt a 'little and often' regime for fertiliser applications in the year of harvest avoiding the Autumn application of high N fertilisers that could prolong the growing season and delay the onset of dormancy. If nitrogen application for colour is considered essential, use a high K fertiliser with close to a 1:2 N to K ratio and apply before the end of September. Snowbird is currently discussing the formulation of a high K conditioning foliar feed for late September application, with the aim of bringing forward the onset of dormancy.

2 Retailers, wholesalers and growers when negotiating orders should try to agree delivery schedules that take account of retail sales patterns; recognising that a maximum 15% of Nordmann and little, if any spruce is sold in November. We need to begin treating trees like the fresh produce they really are and not as 'Dry Goods'.

3 There is little doubt that early harvesting is the greatest cause of poor quality. It is the received wisdom that trees should where possible be cut after the 15th November. Pressure mainly from larger multiple buyers means that some growers harvest is nearly complete by that date! Unfortunately no UK research has been carried out to establish how long after cutting a tree retains the ability

to re-hydrate once a stem disc has been cut and the tree placed in water, perhaps the key definition of 'freshness'. US research based on Balsam Fir indicates this period to be as little as two weeks. I believe new research is required in order to inform commercial decisions based on UK conditions and specific to Nordmann Fir. Wholesale growers need to keep an open mind and be willing to adapt their harvest schedules to accommodate phased deliveries.

4 It is considered good practice for a grower to leave trees to 'condition' in the field for a minimum of two days after cutting and before netting. This allows for initial rapid moisture loss before the stomata of the trees fully close. Cautious growers in 2014 extended this period mindful of conditions. Again, it would be useful to have research on UK crops, perhaps in Scotland and Southern England to inform best practice.

5 Growers should select a size of netting appropriate to the size and bulk of the trees being netted. Whilst modern power netters can force even large domestic trees into a 25 cm net, it isn't good for the tree. Damage to needles due to net abrasion results in the release of ethylene gas, significantly raising the risk of further tissue damage and wilting. 31 cm net is fine for most trees up to 1.75 m and 34

A new threat emerged in 2015, potentially far more damaging than over-production. Record high mean temperatures throughout November and December have exposed the current fragility of our wholesale supply chain model with significant incidences of needle drop in Nordmann Fir reported where trees were cut particularly early or stored badly. Growers should be increasingly concerned that consumers are losing patience with 'Fresh' trees that are anything but and 'Non-Drop' that clearly do drop their needles! Unfortunately customers are frequently presented with a 'fresh tree', which disappoints and this must be recognised as a serious threat to the whole industry.

Fortunately by no means all trees are affected, but poor practice at any point along the journey from the field to market is increasingly likely to give rise to problems. A typical 1.75-2.0 metre, (5'10"-6'6") Nordmann takes some eleven years to grow from seed to harvest and with so much care being taken by seedsmen, nurserymen and growers, we need to do more to ensure our trees reach the consumer in the freshest possible condition.

cm more appropriate for trees up to 2.0 m. It is far better for tree quality to rely on the compression cycle of the palletising machine and not the brute force of power netter!

6 Growers, wholesalers and retailers must at all times minimise the time trees spend in pallets. Modern tree pallets have revolutionised our industry, but must only be considered as a means of transport and NOT storage. Trees are subject to significant compaction during palletising. Localised increased levels of respiration are inevitable and may lead to anaerobic respiration, a characteristic alcohol smell, over-heating and foliar damage. Retailers should unload pallets as soon as possible and at least within 48 hours of delivery. Trees should be stored upright in their nets and away from direct sunshine. If stored under cover or in dry periods, spray with a fine water mist every two to three days. Try to minimise handling and net removal from frozen trees.

7 Retailers and consumers should buy stands with significant water capacity, preferably at least 750ml per inch of trunk diameter. Cut 10-20 mm off the base of the tree before placing in the stand and water within two hours of cutting. Traditional tubular steel stands are not adequate for maintaining freshness of a tree in the home.

Our levels of plant sales have remained constant for a number of years, although reports from Denmark and Germany indicate a 20% drop in plantings. As many of our customers are essentially grower-retailers, I think we may be fortunately isolated from this reduction, reflecting the public's increasing support for trees direct from the grower. Perhaps the appeal of a truly fresh tree is being recognised!

Nursery stock supply is overall plentiful, although recent poor seed yields from Danish seed orchards mean supplies of three year seed orchard plants are limited. The lower prices of four year plants this season reflect a sizable Danish surplus.

We thank you for your business in the past and look forward to hearing from you very soon.

A REMINDER TO CUSTOMERS RECEIVING DELIVERIES FROM US

- Trees in bags delivered by courier should be stored upright in a cool dark store.
- Trees delivered in pallet crates should be unpacked immediately upon delivery and the individual bags stored standing upright in a cool dark store.
- There is no need to untie the tops of the bags unless they are delivered already untied. Danish Nordmann plants in boxes should be stored no more than three high and with good air circulation. Boxes should remain sealed until ready for use. Trees should store safely in this condition for one to four weeks depending upon delivery date and temperature.