

More market choice for the clubhouse Christmas tree

Dr Terry Mabbett provides some timely advice on selecting the perfect tree to add the festive touch to your club



UK is fast approaching complete self-sufficiency in Christmas trees.



INSET BELOW: Colorado blue spruce is much admired for its attractive coloured foliage

Options and choices for the clubhouse Christmas tree have changed out of all proportion over the last twenty years, in the range of trees on offer, country of origin, method of production and even in the method of marketing.

Childhood Christmas tree memories for those the other side of fifty will be of Norway spruce, the traditional and often gangly conifer that dropped its needles en masse as Christmas moved into the New Year.

Norway spruce is still used to today and continues to take a healthy slice of the lower cheaper end of the Christmas tree market, but has long been overtaken by the Nordmann fir.

Nordmann fir is a much more compact and better looking tree and providing it has not been harvested too early will retain its needles when taken inside for decoration.

Ironically Norway was never the main supplier of Norway spruce as Christmas trees and in the same way the Nordic sounding name of 'Nordmann fir' belies the tree's true native origins.

The wild native distribution of the Nordmann fir is the Caucasus where Europe becomes Asia in countries like Turkey and Georgia from where the best seed originates.

Denmark was always the biggest producer and supplier of Christmas trees for the European market and is originally responsible for the runaway success of Nordmann fir as a commercial Christmas tree, not only in the UK but all over Europe as well.

It was Danish Christmas tree growers who went into Georgia and collected the seed which started the contemporary Christmas tree industry based on Nordmann fir.

The other big change relates to country of origin.

Ten years ago a Christmas tree purchased in the UK, whether Nordmann fir or Norway spruce, would more than likely have been grown in Europe (probably Denmark), and shipped to the UK for Christmas.

Today your tree's roots will almost certainly have been embedded in British (or Irish) soil.

The British Christmas tree industry is one of unparalleled success with the UK going from dependency on European (mainly Danish grown) Christmas trees (mostly Nordmann fir) to virtual self-sufficiency in little more than five years.

In yet another irony, we have the Danes - and the European Union (EU) - to thank for the UK's ongoing

success in producing of homegrown Christmas trees.

Around ten years ago changes in EU policy emanating from Brussels made it increasingly uneconomical for Danish Christmas tree growers (always the best in Europe) to ply their traditional craft and trade in trees. Many upped sticks and moved from Denmark to Britain to take advantage of our rich soil, kind climate and relatively low land prices as well as a ready market for Christmas trees.

The market aspect was not so important because Christmas tree production and marketing is now a highly integrated pan European business with increasing numbers of Christmas trees now shipped from the UK to continental Europe instead of the other way round.

However, not all is plain sailing because this overnight success for British (and Irish) grown Nordmann fir and its growers has led to the current shortage of larger trees which started to materialise two years ago. Such is the demand for Nordmann fir currently taking 55 per cent of the market that many UK growers have been cutting and lifting trees for Christmas sale before they have attained the most popular size of 2 metres.

This type of shortage will clearly pose a problem for buyers like golf clubs that will need a good sized tree of between 7 and 10 feet. To make matters worse, Nordmann fir is not a particularly fast growing tree and requires 8 years to achieve 2 metres in height. This has aggravated the shortage of 2 m+ trees on the market.

Timing of purchase

Christmas as a commercial rather than a religious and cultural event is being forced on consumers earlier and earlier.

The Christmas tree industry is not altogether without blame in this respect. Every year starting in July we hear the same old story urging buyers right along the chain to place orders and to purchase early to avoid disappointment. The industry obliges by forcing growers to harvest their trees earlier and earlier with the traditional first big delivery date of the first week of December now brought forward to the third week of November.

Those two weeks are crucial as far as living Christmas trees are concerned because these conifers require a period of sustained cold to make sure the needles (leaves) are firmly fixed (set).

What's more, harvesting in mid-November means the average tree

is going to be out of the ground and devoid of roots for almost two months before being finally taken down and hopefully recycled.

Even species like the Nordmann fir with one of the finest reputations for needle retention cannot cope with such a long pre-Christmas marketing period. Increasing reports over the last few years of 'needle drop' in Nordmann fir are ascribed to the industry marketing trees much too early before Christmas.

One way around this 'catch-22' situation for consumers, of either purchasing a Christmas tree too early or being left disappointed without a suitable tree, is to place an order early in the year and preferably with a grower that allows you to visit the farm and 'pick your own' tree.

Type of tree

Nordmann fir and Norway spruce at the top and bottom of the market, respectively, are not the only conifers the UK market can offer as Christmas trees. There are nowhere near as many as on the North American market (where believe it not Leylandii cypress is used as a Christmas tree) but nevertheless an increasingly interesting selection is available in the UK.

Scots pine, one of only three native British conifers (the other two are English yew and common juniper), and to a lesser extent lodgepole pine have niche markets in Scotland and northern England, while two North American favourites, noble fir and Douglas fir, are making their presence felt.

Each four of these conifer species, like Nordmann fir, has a good reputation for needle retention after harvest. Colorado blue spruce is always a firm favourite due to its attractive blue-green foliage and pleasant aroma (and good needle retention) while the more open canopied Serbian spruce, a favourite in central Europe, makes a good centre display.

The vast majority of Christmas trees are harvested by cutting and sold rootless but an increasing number of consumers are going for root-balled or container-grown trees on the basis that 'a Christmas tree is not just for Christmas', and subsequently chancing their luck by planting the tree and perhaps using it in years to come.

Colorado blue spruce has one of the best survival rates in this respect.

Increasing numbers of consumers are also opting for organically

grown trees without use of artificial fertilizers or pesticides. One possible problem with organically grown trees is that organic growers are not allowed to use chemical pesticides and may therefore find it hard to manage insect pests like aphids.

These insect pests may infest and damage new foliage in spring and spoil the shape of the tree and cause it to lose colour.

Time permitting you can't beat a visit to the Christmas tree farm to choose your own tree.

This will help you secure the right quality tree as near to Christmas as possible. One other interesting option is to 'rent' a container grown tree which will be delivered to your door shortly before Christmas, and collected after the '12th day' which tradition says is when the Christmas tree and decorations should be taken down.

You can even opt for a long term contract and rent the same tree year after year.

The supplier provides the tree with tender loving care on the farm throughout the year and will deliver the tree to your door the following Christmas.

Increasing cost

Real live, good quality Christmas trees do not come cheap.

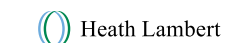
Two metre Nordmann firs, which set the market price, hovered below £50 for several years until 2010 when they broke through this ceiling.

There are significant regional differences in price with London consumers paying a hefty premium.

Customers using garden centres and other mainstream retailers should now expect to pay at least £50 for a 2m Nordmann fir, irrespective of location in the UK, with a same size Norway spruce somewhat less.

Golf clubs and greenkeepers are in an ideal position and situation to beat any shortages and price increases in Christmas trees.

Next time a small plantation of trees is planned for an area of rough on the golf course plant Nordmann fir, Norway spruce, Colorado blue spruce, Scot's pine, or whatever takes your fancy, and then harvest a Christmas tree for the clubhouse in December for years to come.



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ABOVE: Quality Nordmann fir now take around 55 per cent of the UK market

MAIN RIGHT: Predictions are for a shortage of larger trees in 2013.

Picture courtesy BCTGA

BELOW: Trees benefit from a period of low temperature prior to harvest.

Picture courtesy BCTGA



**“Predictions are for
a shortage of larger
trees in 2013”**

