

# NOTES ON GROWING CHRISTMAS TREES

These notes have been prepared by English Woodlands Burrow Nursery and are for general guidance only. They are not intended to provide a comprehensive or detailed guide and you should obtain further advice where necessary.

## Introduction

Growing of Christmas trees can be a profitable enterprise but it is not without risk. As with any agricultural crop the quality of the end product, and therefore the price obtained, is very important. Good quality trees will normally find a ready market. However, second grade trees are difficult to sell. It is therefore vital that consideration is given to the details of growing this crop so that at harvest time - some 5 or more years after planting - the crop is saleable for a worthwhile price.

## Site Selection

It is important to choose a suitable site on which to grow the crop. Avoid a frost hollow as young trees can be damaged by late spring frosts. Good access is desirable for cultural operations but remember that this could be a temptation to Christmas Tree thieves when the trees are older. Most species are tolerant of a wide range of soil types but you should avoid very acid soils, chalky soils, heavy clay or very sandy soils.

The ideal tree is one that has grown steadily, but not so quickly as to become 'leggy' or have long shoots. To achieve this the land should not be too fertile, although even on good farm land vigorous growth can be controlled by shearing.

## Protection from pests

The trees will need protection from:

- Rabbits. A rabbit-proof fence is the most satisfactory method of achieving this and in most cases this is essential.
- Insects. The main pests are aphids and these can be controlled by regular spraying with a suitable pesticide several times through the growing season. Expert advice may be necessary on particular pesticides.
- Deer. In certain areas these may be a problem and in extreme cases deer fencing may be required

## Species

The most popular tree in the market is Norway Spruce and this is the species most commonly planted. The growing cycle of Norway Spruce is about 4 to 6 years.

However Nordman Fir (Caucasian Fir) and Noble Fir are increasingly being planted as well. These firs are slower to grow and more expensive to produce, taking

6 to 10 years to grow, depending on growth and size required. Noble Fir is however best grown only in high rainfall areas and is not suited to south-east England.

Blue Spruce and Serbian Spruce are also popular as Christmas Trees and are similar to Norway Spruce in terms of their growing requirements. Blue Spruce however is particularly prone to damage from aphids unless controlled.

## Plant Spacing

Normal spacing for Spruces is either 1m x 1m or 1.2m x 1.2m. Noble and Nordman Fir are normally planted at 1.2m x 1.2m.

Spacing	Trees / Ha	Trees / acre
1m x 1m	10,000	4200
1m x 1.2m	8300	3500
1.2m x 1.2m	6900	2900

## Pre-planting treatment

It is vital to control weed growth in Christmas tree plantations, particularly grass weeds, and this task is made very much easier if a pre-plant application of Glyphosate (Roundup) or similar herbicide is made, preferably in late summer/autumn prior to planting. If the ground is to be cultivated prior to planting then it is a good idea to do this in the autumn and make a further application of herbicide to any weeds that germinate prior to planting.

## Plants

In the case of Norway Spruce, either 3 year or 4 year plants may be used. However on exposed sites it is advisable to use the 3 year plants. The firs and other spruces are normally smaller plants. All plants will have been transplanted in the nursery to ensure good root systems and branching are achieved.

Plants supplied for Christmas Tree production are grown from seed that has been specially selected for the purpose from trees which exhibit the characteristics that are required in Christmas trees. Details of the seed origin for plants supplied are available on request, free of charge.

The planting season runs from late November to early April (ie the dormant period) Plants are normally supplied in special plant bags designed to protect the

trees until they are planted. They can be stored in these bags for a short time providing they are kept in the shade. Planting should take place as soon as possible after receiving the plants. If it is not possible to plant them within 4 days of receipt then the plants should be removed from the bags and heeled-in.

## **Planting**

Normal forestry techniques apply. It is very important to ensure that at no time are the plants allowed to dry out. Ensure that plant roots are protected at all times from sunlight and wind, until they are planted.

It is important to ensure that plants are planted vertically, at the right depth, and with the root-collar at ground level, and well firmed in.

## **Weed Control**

Good quality Christmas trees can only be grown if they are kept free from weeds. The foliage of the lower branches is particularly susceptible to weeds and will go brown if smothered. Glyphosate can be used as an overall spray when the trees are dormant, although half rate is advisable. Specialist advice may be necessary on the selection and application of suitable herbicides.

## **Fertilisers**

Fertiliser are not normally necessary but can be useful to correct any poor foliage colour which may arise in a plantation, particularly prior to harvesting.

## **Shearing**

Shearing is a technique used to improve the shape of trees particularly where there has been vigorous growth. The result of shearing is a bushier tree with an improved shape. The technique can be successfully used to convert otherwise poorly-shaped trees into first

quality well-shaped trees, particularly if carried out in several successive years.

The technique is normally commenced in the third or fourth year and involves the cutting back of part of the leading shoot and the ends of the lateral branches. This results in some immediate shape correction but also stimulates dormant buds further down the shoots resulting in bushier growth next season. The timing will depend on the species, but for Norway Spruce September to March is the preferred time.

## **Harvesting and Marketing**

Some factors to consider:

- Will the whole crop be cleared in one season, or over 2 or 3 seasons?
- Will you harvest them or will you sell them 'standing' and let the buyer harvest them? If the latter, how will you control which trees the buyer takes?
- Trees are bulky. Use of netting machines can greatly improve handling.
- Will you cut trees and leave stumps in ground, or dig the trees?
- How many of your trees are saleable?
- Will you sell per tree or per foot?
- Security. Each year a lot of Christmas trees are stolen.

## **Useful addresses**

English Woodlands Burrow Nursery, Cross in Hand, Heathfield, East Sussex TN21 0UG  
Tel 01435 862992 Fax 01435 867742

British Christmas Tree Growers Association, 18 Cluny Place, Edinburgh EH10 4RL  
Tel 0131 447 0499 Fax 0131 447 6443

Colin Palmer. Pesticide Advice  
Tel 01531 633500

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