



News and Views 2024

Christmas tree plants for Spring 2024

We are pleased to bring you our plant price list for the Spring 2024 delivery season. It's difficult to believe, but this is our thirtieth anniversary year. Unfortunately, the picture above does confirm the passing of years! We extend a huge thank you to all our customers who continue to support us buying our plants and growers supplies and making our business so much a part of your own.

Frozen ground in Denmark and ongoing rain in Southern England mean we are likely to start the new season plant deliveries later than usual and probably well into February. Availability of plants for sale is good, although most nurseries in Denmark and Germany are sold out of **Nordmann Fir**.

Due to a poor seed crop in 2020, there is zero availability of **Bornmueller Fir**, which I know will disappoint many. We do however have excellent stocks of seed orchard Nordmann, in fact, for the first time in this year, virtually all of our Nordmann Fir plants are from Danish seed orchards. These improved stocks have much more uniform growth and potentially between 10 and 18% more prime trees at harvest when compared to Ambrolauri Tlugi.

Fraser Fir is freely available again after a few lean seasons. We have a range of excellent quality options from top performing US seed orchards, Berkey #241 and Vannoy.

For many years, we have supplied small quantities of **Arizona Corkbark Fir**, *Abies lasiocarpa* *Arizona* from Apache National Forest Arizona. The largest productions of this species as Christmas trees are on the West coast of Norway, where late flushing and a resistance to extreme Winter temperatures are critical. As a result of recent provenance selection and the establishment of twin seed orchards in Norway and Denmark, we have available very limited quantities of two different provenances of a related species, **Rocky Mountain Fir**, *Abies lasiocarpa*, from the Pacific Northwest. These trees share native ranges with some of our commercial timber trees, such as Douglas Fir, Sitka Spruce and Lodgepole Pine. As such, they may be expected to grow well in UK conditions, with a strong blue-green colour and better natural form when compared with A.L. *Arizona*. Very unlikely ever to be a major species for us, but an interesting story and perhaps worth a look?

Christmas tree plants for Spring 2024 continued

Choosing between all the different provenances of Nordmann Fir may seem daunting, but any of the lots we list will perform well under UK conditions and offer significant advantages over Tlugi Ambrolauri, which has been a staple of the industry for the last thirty years. In particular, larger growers will find these stocks a lot more uniform, with a narrower range of flushing dates making leader control tasks easier. All growers will notice far fewer 'Bolt-Away' 'Racer' trees and reduced numbers of early flushing types, which are more prone to frost damage. Ambrolauri gene pool provenances are very slightly slower growing, ideal for lower elevations under 600'. When grown at higher elevation, they can become too wide and require harder lateral pruning. Borshomi gene pool provenances in Danish trials are just 1 cm per year faster growing, although in practice, at lower and medium elevations these differences are difficult to detect. The latest 1.5 generation 'Elite' orchards, such as Smorhaverne and Dramstrup have been established using the very best clones from Silkeborg Nordskov and Mosemark orchards; as such they offer the best uniformity and shape currently available from Nordmann. A very new, true second-generation orchard is currently being established, using the best 110 clones selected from a Danish crop of 18,000 Skibelund trees. Plants from this orchard are predicted to be available from 2044 onwards. Growing Christmas trees does require some patience!

For those of us that can't wait that long, (or don't have that long to wait!) we are incredibly excited about the prospects for *Abies bornmuelleriana*. Our own crop of Kongsøre is now four years old and already looking spectacular compared to the Skibelund growing alongside. We are so convinced that Bornmueller Fir is set to make a major contribution to our industry, it is central to our future plans. In fact, over 50% of our contract seed sowing in Denmark this Spring will be between Kongsøre and FP.1005 Ry Langebakke 'Son of Kongsøre', a new 1.5 gen elite orchard using the best 18 clones selected out of Kongsøre. Plants from this origin expected in Spring of 2027. We hope to bring you some pictures from Ry later this year.

Despite recent slowing of cut tree spruce sales, we supply most customers with Norway Spruce as part of their growing mix. This year for the first time, we have Danish grown Jura 504 provenance from our own Danish contract production. Jura 504 is our preferred provenance for most situations. It is grown from seed collected in a small sub-alpine region between the Jura and Savoie, has a medium growth rate, with good uniformity and form. For growers wanting a slightly faster growing, but highly uniform tree, with a higher shearing requirement, we offer the Danish seed orchard origin Sonderskovgard. This spruce orchard is growing adjacent to the Nordmann seed orchard of the same name in Southern Fyn.

Many of our customers buy their fertiliser, ground pots and planting sundries from us for delivery with their plants. Prices for fertiliser have come down significantly from last year's highs, whilst pot prices remain unchanged. For more information on these and our extensive range of sundries, please take a look at our web shop at <https://shop.snowbirdchristmastrees.co.uk/>



A Snapshot of Tree Sales 2023

At this time of the year, we always try to provide a summary of the tree sales for the season just ended and share some thought for possible future trends affecting our industry. We get a huge amount of feedback from grower customers of Snowbird, but also from Danish suppliers and from retailer customers of our sister company, The Christmas Cabin Ltd. Usually this gives us some useful insights and a broad picture of what is going on.

For our own part, our retail tree sales were only slightly up by takings and static when measured by tree numbers, (we sold five more trees than in 2022!). Our decoration sales were noticeably slow and were only kept buoyant by the quirkiness and enduring appeal of Felt-So-Good (www.feltsogood.co.uk!) A significant number of fellow grower retailers report similarly unchanged sales, although a few saw slight shrinkage, up to 5-6% and a larger minority, mostly on recently established sites reported continuing growth. A repeating theme in recent seasons is growers reporting a strong increase in demand for larger 9-12' trees which garden centres and other outlets frequently do not offer. In a reversal of recent trends, there has been stronger demand for 4-6' smaller trees as purse-strings became tighter!

Wholesale sales were just slightly down on last year, with growers and traders selling the majority of their stock at slightly improved prices. Potentially more trees could have been sold, had they been available. Spruce in particular, although selling in lower numbers, was in short supply. A slight increase in Danish Nordmann Fir imports was reported, as fewer trees were available from Scottish growers where plantings have significantly declined over the last seven to eight years.. Tree quality from many sources was reported to be lower than previous seasons, with significant grade 'slippage' reported. Some larger growers may be struggling to meet demand from a reduced acreage. It is very common to hear of trees being delivered a full grade lower than the expected norm. I think it is now fair to assume that all the slack has gone out of the supply chain, and we are about to enter an extended period where trees are in limited supply. We heard three separate reports before Christmas from Danish growers confirming that this certainly applies to Danish production.

Perhaps it is a little too early in January to get a full picture of how well trees sold through garden centres and volume retailers. There is always the danger that bad news travels faster than good. We are hearing reports of some outlets with significant numbers of unsold trees. Potentially these are the exception and not the norm. One thing that is becoming evident is that quality and freshness always sell well. The same stories emerge every season of retailers ignoring their supplier's advice on how to handle fresh Christmas trees. Unfortunately, trees stored awaiting sale for weeks under cover and still in their pallets isn't the way to responsibly handle fresh goods! Many thousands of trees get treated this way, with some high-end garden centre chains equally as culpable as box-store sellers. All the news isn't bad, the very best trees I saw this season were outside my local Waitrose in Stamford. They had been delivered upright in supermarket cages and were dark green and beautifully fresh. Admittedly though, the price aligned with the quality!

There is no doubt that consumer spending is down. Many customers report much reduced sales of decorations and stands. As already mentioned, there is evidence of customers choosing a smaller tree. Quite how our industry will cope with conflicting pressures of increased prices and reduced spending, I am not sure. Inevitably, I guess that fewer trees will be sold at higher prices, as supply and demand reach a new balance.

I do believe that we as growers can look forward to Christmas trees being in strong demand through the current decade. Grower-retailers and wholesale growers who have either maintained, or increased their production in recent years, are particularly well-placed. Hopefully we will see a small increase in future planting, however, supplies of nursery stock across Europe, may become more limited as nurseries increase their production of forestry species in response to a strong demand for woodland planting.

2+1 - 3/0 or 2+2?

2+1 Nordmann are the most widely used in Christmas tree production. Two year old seedlings are transplanted from seedling beds and grown for a third season as transplants. 2+1 plants are sturdy and have excellent root development, in balance with the top growth. They offer the highest chance of rapid establishment with minimal losses and are suitable for both hand and machine planting.

3/0 plants have spent three years in the seedling beds, which have undergone intensive management including thinning to optimum bed density and under-cutting to stimulate compact root development. In comparison to 2+1's, they are generally slightly taller and lighter, with particularly longer third season leader extension. Top whorl bud numbers are often higher, but root growth isn't usually as complex. 3/0 plants are particularly well suited to machine planting, where their slender stems and lighter roots allow even feeding into the machine. The higher positioning of the terminal bud cluster above ground after planting makes it more likely that the resultant whorl will constitute the lower branches of the harvested tree, with resulting higher branch numbers. Also suitable for hand planting into better well-prepared soils.

2+2 four-year-old plants are often mistakenly chosen in order to gain a year's growth. This is possible when planting into good loamy soils on sheltered sites, but the extra strain on the roots from a much larger bushy top, often has the opposite effect. Ideal for beating-up older plantings and for hand planting. Avoid Autumn planting on exposed sites, where Winter wind-rock can be a serious problem.



A reminder to customers receiving plant 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.**
- **Do not untie the tops of bags for storage and on no account pour water into the bags.**
- **Do not soak trees in water before planting as this washes away the protective soil on the roots and exposes microscopic root hairs to possible damage.**
- **A light spray using water from a clean knapsack is the best way to moisten roots.**
- **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.

We thank you for your business in the past and look forward to hearing from you soon
Adrian & Cheryl Morgan