

# Tree Line



New Hampshire-Vermont Christmas Tree Association

September 2011

## *Special point of interest:*

### ♦ **Winter Meeting—New Site:**

Just a reminder, as covered in the last issue of Tree Line, the Vermont Farm Show will be moving from Barre to the Champlain Valley Expo in Essex Junction, Vt. Next year's event is scheduled for three days, beginning Tuesday, Jan. 24. The NHVTCTA annual winter meeting will be held on Jan. 24 in the Expo building. Other agricultural associations will also be meeting there, and everyone should benefit from gathering in a single facility with direct access to the farm show.

### ♦ **Farms for Sale?:**

On occasion, the NHVTCTA receives calls inquiring about possible tree farms for sale. If anyone has or knows of any, please let Jim Horst know, (802) 447-1900.

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## Fall Meeting Preview: Glove Hollow

*By Mike Ahern*

Karen and I wish to welcome you all to Glove Hollow Christmas Tree Farm for our fall meeting on Sept 24. It was roughly 22 years ago that the association was last here and since then there have been many changes. Our family purchased the farm in 1897; my late father, Omer Ahern Sr., the 3rd generation owner, planted the first trees in 1957. For many years we operated at 43,000 trees, planting 5,000 per year. In 2004/07 we added 95



acres of neighboring hayfields which has allowed us to grow to 80,000 trees, harvesting the first trees off the new land this past December.

*Continued on Page 10*

## Update from National

*By Nigel Manley*

I am still happy and proud to be able to represent the New Hampshire-Vermont Christmas Tree Association at the National level, both as a board member and as the chair of the Christmas Spirit Foundation, the not for profit arm of the NCTA. This foundation runs Trees for Troops, which was a resounding success again last year and is a go for this year. We will deliver the 100,000th tree this year through this program.

NCTA is on the front lines of many issues that affect

Christmas tree growers nationwide. These include fire safety, ag status, crop protection regulations, specialty crop recognition. What most people ask is how do these programs affect my individual business?

Here are some specific examples:

- "Agriculture status" means that staff employed on Christmas tree farms are considered ag workers, so no overtime has to be paid.

- Crop protection helps to keep certain chemical registered for Christmas tree production.

*Continued on Page 7*



# President's Message:

Dear Members:

Hopefully everyone's trees were spared from the flooding that the hurricane brought us a few weeks ago. It seems there is always some drastic weather event to discuss as each season progresses!

With cooler nights and changing leaves brings thoughts of harvest season drawing near. We have all been blessed with many years of brisk sales and a shortage of trees in the Northeast, but I have seen signs of this slowly changing.

There have been many years of excessive planting by not only new growers looking to make a buck in the business, but also established

growers increasing planting to satisfy customer demands. This customer demand is slowly drying up due to the pressures of artificial trees, economic hardship by much of the population, and the general breakdown of the traditional family structure.

I think everyone would agree that our country is in serious trouble and the Christmas tree industry is not exempt. America is at a crossroads now and it is going to take a concerted effort from our government and more importantly from society as a whole to turn it around and take this country back to prosperity.

Christmas tree farmers

are a unique group dominated by hard working people who are earning an honest living and I think we set a good example for the rest of the country to follow!

Please take the time to fill out the ballots for the upcoming elections and I hope to see you at the fall meeting at Mike Ahern's farm on September 24.

This will be my last meeting serving as president and it has been enjoyable working with the other officers, directors and members in the association for the past two years. Thank you.

*Jay Weir  
President*



## New Hampshire-Vermont Christmas Tree Association



### 2011 Officers

President	Jay Weir	(603) 237-8617
Vice President	Mary Lou Schmidt	(802) 257-0233
Recording Secretary	Russell Reay	(802) 492-3323
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### 2011 Directors

### (Term Ends)

Dan Beloin	(603) 237-8633	(2012)
Mike Godzyk	(603) 237-5702	(2013)
Ben Hoyt	(603) 838-6403	(2013)
Phil Kivlin	(802) 897-8031	(2011)
Tom Lang	(802) 223-7028	(2012)
Paul Lemire	(603) 882-8012	(2012)
Nigel Manley	(603) 444-6228	(2011)
Bill Nichols	(603) 353-4832	(2011)
Mary Lou Schmidt	(802) 257-0233	(2013)
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### 2012 Tree Line Publication Schedule


Issue	Ad/Submission Deadline
January	Jan. 6
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September	Sept. 7



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## Shearing, Tree Style and Value-Added Marketing

*Editor's Note: This article appeared in the Massachusetts Christmas Tree Association's newsletter and it caught my eye as I had just come in from shearing. Food for thought...*

*By Jeff Owen*

*NC State University Extension*  
It's shearing time again. You may be thinking about how to train yet another new crew and what to emphasize to them to increase the percentage of #1's and premium trees in your field. You know what your customers bought last year. That's what you will aim for this year. As you evaluate your trees, you may be considering how short to cut leaders to hold the trees back and increase density. This may be the same approach you use every year—but maybe it shouldn't be. Here are some alternative thoughts to consider.

As an industry, perhaps

we should rethink our commodity market and a tagging system that includes only one standard for perfection for a naturally diverse crop. By our current grade standard, many growers left a high percentage of #2's in the field last year to be cut and burned as culls. Many of those #2's were well-shaped trees with good branch structure—just light on density. One could blame the failure to sell #2's strictly on the oversupply, but it is also a marketing issue and a labeling problem.

Christmas tree growers continue to handle their trees as a commodity while our “fake” tree competitors treat it as a value-added product. We sell by size class. We have one grade-driven definition of perfection—a heavy density premium—while our competitors make and package every kind of tree including a “Charlie

Brown.” We only have the imagination to call a light density tree with good branch structure a #2 and ask less money for it. Trapped by our commodity mentality, we fail to meet customer demand for choice—even when we already grow (and in bad times, burn) the trees that they would like from our fields.

How many times have I heard people say about a lush, heavy-density Fraser fir, “that is a beautiful tree, but [I, we, my wife] likes a more open tree that you can hang long glass ornaments on.” Or, “I like to see the lights and ornaments in the tree, not just on the outside.” These potential customers may not represent the majority of U.S. Christmas tree consumers, but they represent more than just a fraction. With appropriate marketing, this customer base could certainly expand and would allow us to sell more light density trees.

However, the markets for a lighter density tree won't expand as long as we label it as junk (a #2) and price it as such. If we want our customers to value and appreciate a light to medium density tree with uniform branch structure, we need to change how we put the product out in the marketplace. A new name would be a start, but there needs to be more—individual marketing efforts that show off decorated light-density trees as well as the typical tightly sheared product. It may look “puny” undecorated next to a full heavy-density tree, but customers

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## Brush Control in Christmas Trees

*By John F. Ahrens*

We can define “brush” in Christmas trees as any woody perennial plant that invades the plantation. “Brush” may include all of the tree species as well as the woody vines such as poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), Oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quenquefolia*) and several others. All of these can become serious weeds and poison ivy can create a health problem for workers and, in choose-and-cut plantations, the unsuspecting public. Woody plants may develop from seeds which are often spread by birds or by wind, from pieces of root or from stump sprouts. Sooner or later every plantation in New England will become infested with woody invaders. Conifers are rarely a problem, because they will not resprout, when cut off at the soil line. However, failure to control deciduous brush annually, can reap severe consequences. What is a small problem the first season becomes a much greater problem in the second season and beyond. Woody growth the first year may only be 12 to 18 inches tall and easy to control. In the second or later years, seasonal growth of woody species may be 3 to 4 feet or more, and much more difficult to control, requiring broadcast rather than banded applications of herbicides, directed basal sprays in oil or costly mechanical removal.

Unfortunately, most of the

preemergence herbicides, applied in the spring, in Christmas trees plantations, do not control woody plants that may start later in the season or are protected from the herbicides by growing close to the conifer stems. Only flumioxazin (SureGuard) and sulfometuron plus hexazinone (Westar) have controlled woody plants from seed. The hexazinone in Westar controls some established woody plants but the rates used are too low to control most woody species.

I remember too well, a Christmas tree grower who had excellent results with spring-applied simazine and atrazine to control perennial grasses and most annual weeds. Invading gray and white birch were uncontrolled and ignored, however, and soon became so tall that expensive cutting was necessary. Then, to do a thorough job and prevent resprouting, it was necessary to treat the stumps. All told, this proved to be a costly process that could have been avoided if treatments were made while the invading trees were small.

The two main herbicides that control deciduous woody plants, and are registered for Christmas trees, are Roundup (glyphosate) and Garlon 3A (triclopyr amine). Both are effective at 1½ to 2 quarts per acre and, at these rates, are tolerated by true firs and spruces early in the fall, usually between Labor Day and September 15, when these conifers have matured and

“hardened off”. Spot treatment rates of Roundup and Garlon 3A are 1½ to 2 ounces per gallon.

Most effective results in early fall are obtained before senescence of the woody plants. That is, before deciduous leaves lose their normal green color and become yellow or reddish. Also, to be effective, these herbicides must be applied before a killing frost, which makes many deciduous leaves shed.

Roundup has become the standard fall herbicide because it controls not only woody plants, but also most perennial grasses, as well as most winter annual, biennial and perennial plants. However, Garlon 3A has an advantage over Roundup in some instances. Early season (late spring or early summer) directed applications of Roundup may kill the tops of woody plants but not the roots, so directed applications of Garlon 3A in May or June can be more effective.

Garlon 3A is effective when deciduous growth is in full leaf in late May and June, whereas Roundup is most effective on brush in August or early September. Garlon also is more effective than Roundup in controlling Oriental bittersweet at any time and Garlon does not kill grasses, whereas Roundup does.

Why even think about brush control in May, June, or July, when conifers are more tolerant in early fall, and with

## Brush control (continued)

spruce and true firs, you can then spray without fear of injuring the conifers. One reason is that vines can deform Christmas trees if they are allowed to grow all season. Using a directed spray in June can prevent the problem. Sometimes, growers pull out the vines, laying them on the ground and spraying them with Garlon or Roundup. With poison ivy, it may be best to spray in late spring, before the twining begins, avoiding personal contact with the poisonous plants.

Directed sprays of amine formulations of 2,4-D also are effective in controlling poison ivy and a few other woody plants, such as willows and wild cherry. It is best to avoid the ester formulations of 2,4-D because they can be volatile and injure Christmas trees, especially during hot weather.

Although they are not woody plants, it is worth repeating here that vetches and the twining bindweed can deform Christmas trees if not removed early in the growing season. There are two bindweed species—hedge bindweed (*Convolvulus*

*sepium*) and field bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*) and both are commonly and mistakenly called morning glory by many growers. Both twine around conifers and can deform the leaders. Vetches of several species do the same. In my backyard plantation, I found that Goal 2XL at 2/3 ounce (2 tablespoons) plus Stinger at 1/2 teaspoon per gallon of water in June, kills vetch and bindweed tops and prevents the deformation. The bindweeds are not killed to the roots, but damage to the trees is prevented, without injury to true firs, Douglas-fir or white pine.

It is possible to add a preemergence herbicide to the fall-applied brush killers. Simazine (Princep, Simtrol) at 1 1/2 to 2 lbs/A or SureGuard at 6 ounces/A should control the winter annual weeds that can emerge in the fall. However, triazine-resistant horseweed can be a problem with simazine. If you apply simazine and have triazine-resistant horseweed on your farm, you still can control it in the spring, either by applying Westar, or by adding

Roundup at 1 1/2 pints per acre to the spring preemergence mix. If you have any further questions about weed and brush control, call me at 860-683-4985 or Dr. Todd Mervosh at 860-683-4984.

## NCTA (continued)

*Continued from Page 1*

- Specialty crop recognition has gained the NHVTCTA and the state promotion boards a considerable amount of money in grants over the years.

- Fire safety is important so that we are in the arenas where the rules are made fighting for our industry.

In other news, the national check-off program looks as if it has been passed and will start next year based on this year's production numbers. This will give a huge boost to our industry for marketing and public relations. As an association we need to select one or two individuals to possibly represent us on the Check-Off Board.

The NCTA conference was in Ohio this year. Programs included Canaan Fir production, social media, keeping the industry strong and how to pass the family business on to the next generation. It was a great meeting and we hope to secure a speaker from the meeting to do a program for the Association.

The next meeting is in San Antonio TX in February and then in Sacramento CA in August. If you have any questions about the NCTA please call or e-mail 603-444-6228 or e-mail [info@thetruckers.org](mailto:info@thetruckers.org)

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## Tree Style and Value-Added Marketing (continued)

*Continued from Page 4*

need to imagine it decorated. We need to sell style.

Other types of businesses use style to increase their individual market share. Look at how many “styles” of Cheerios there are on the grocery store shelves these days! If a customer demographic wants something different, they’ll produce it for them. We have natural variation in our fields, why can’t we see it?

A light-density style of tree shouldn’t just be a commercial #1 by a new name. It should be fundamentally different in design: Good branch structure, less filler. Stronger whorls,

fewer branches between whorls. Branches radiating out from the trunk without a lot of horns and crossovers. A little more “natural” in appearance. But if it’s your style, you define it. If you choose to grow and sell more than one style of tree, each would be advertised separately within your own line of products. Each style line would have a name. Perhaps “Champion,” “White House,” or “Prime Cut” for your heavy density line. “Heritage,” “Candlelight,” “European,” or “Perfection,” could be a name for your lighter density style. Call it whatever you choose—it’s an added-value product!

Show a good example in its natural glory and show the same tree decorated. Show these trees on your Web site, in your brochure, or in your trade show display.

To begin with, market the idea. You don’t have to produce many trees until you have a demand for them. Existing natural variation could provide you with your initial numbers. Produce just enough trees initially to take pictures of, take to trade shows, provide samples or display on your retail lots. Depending upon demand, start to shear more trees for your value-added product line (s) in coming years. Risk is

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minimized if you grow the product line to its own customer demand.

Offer different grades for the light density trees just as you do for your regular product. The system of categorizing defects provided by the USDA grading standard would apply to light-medium density trees just as well as to medium-heavy density trees. The number of good sides would determine the grade. Only the density guidelines would be adjusted to distinguish separate style product lines. Heavy or light density, premium trees should fetch a premium price with lesser grades dropping in price accordingly. The beauty of value-added marketing is that product uniqueness contributes to price.

Two styles have the potential to increase the share of trees that grade out as premiums and #1's. When you have more than one product line, select trees for different lines before shearing. Vigorous trees with excellent branch structure may be destined to become a lighter density tree in a relatively short rotation. A tree with a defect that will need to be held back to fill in might be a better candidate for a heavy density tree one or two years later. By identifying the best use for a tree prior to shearing, more trees will reach higher grades within their product line.

As a grower differentiates between heavy and light density product styles, shearing practices will diverge. For heavy

density trees, leaders are held back to no more than one foot and a majority of terminal branch tips are cut during side shearing.

Lighter density trees would have their leaders stretched during mid-rotation to as much as 16 inches and only dominant terminal branch tips would be cut during side shearing. At the end of the rotation, the light density tree would be sheared a little tighter with leaders cut closer to 1 foot. Assuming a normal vigor, the light density trees fill in but are characterized more by even branch structure than by the fullness of the outer cone as with a heavy density tree.

Adding a product line based

*Continued on Page 12*



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Balsam-Fraser Hybrids: Vermont Seed Source	13,000	\$0.015	\$195

Questions?? contact Bill Asack evenings 6-8 pm. 1-802-754-6934

## Whatever happened to Merry Mulch?

*By Mary Lou Schmidt*

In the late 1980s, the beginning of the recycling age, the Vermont Dept. (now Agency) of Agriculture created the Merry Mulch program, not only to help the tree industry to dispose of Christmas trees after the season, but to keep trees from clogging the landfills. This idea was circulated to the Vermont Solid Waste Districts, the NHVTCTA and the national association.

It occurred to me that this might be a possible fundraiser for Brattleboro Union High School band by collecting Christmas trees, for a donation, after the season and taking them to the local landfill for chipping. So I got together with Deb Baker, who had a teenager in the band at the time. She really liked my idea and took it from there. In the early years band members and dads with trucks picked up trees in Brattleboro by request

and a suggested donation of \$5. They were taken to the landfill, chipped and used by the Public Works Dept. Town residents could also take their trees there and pick up bags of chips at no charge. About 2000, the state decided to consolidate the chipping sites and the Brattleboro site was moved farther north. The band could still take the trees to the local landfill, but they could not be chipped there. So the band, having merged with the whole music department for the fundraiser, decided to do it on their own since it was so successful. They moved the operation to the high school, where on three Saturdays in January they picked up the trees and delivered them there. By this time the suggested donation was \$10. They connected with a local logger who brought his chipper and someone to operate it for \$100. On the third Saturday and, with lots of

band members to help, they chipped all of the trees in an hour. These chips were used by the school maintenance department. Then, after a few years there was a backlog of chips, so chips are now used at the Community Gardens. In 2010, 181 trees were chipped. In 21 years, they estimate that 4,000 trees have been chipped and over \$30,000 raised. The band director said, "This is an ideal fundraiser providing a service to residents who have come to depend on it, without asking them to buy something, and is almost 100% profit."

So the Merry Mulch program is still very much alive, in Brattleboro at least. And we encourage all NHVTCTA members to get the program revived/started in their area.

*My thanks to Stephen Rice, BUHS Music Dept., and Jennifer Stevens, parent volunteer coordinator, for their assistance with this article.*

## Fall Meeting: Glove Hollow Farm (continued)

*Continued from Page 1*

Half of our fields are in their 5th rotation. the other half in their 1st, so discussion should be helpful for new and experienced growers. The fields are in a floodplain known locally as "The Lower Intervale." Recently every tree was either partially or completely under water thanks to Irene. Over the years many of the farm buildings have been converted to apartments. Although the entire Ahern family farm is 430 acres of mostly forestlands, the 80,000 Christmas trees, hayfields and buildings cover the 172 acres between the Pemi River and Rte. 3.

Our retail customers come from Plymouth and surrounding towns, including second-home owners of local lake homes east and west as well

as ski condo owners to our north.

We have a demand for much taller trees than we can supply. We oversold last year so there won't be any trees over 7.5' to see. If time permits the agenda will include a brief demo of both shearing knife and chain saw sharpening.

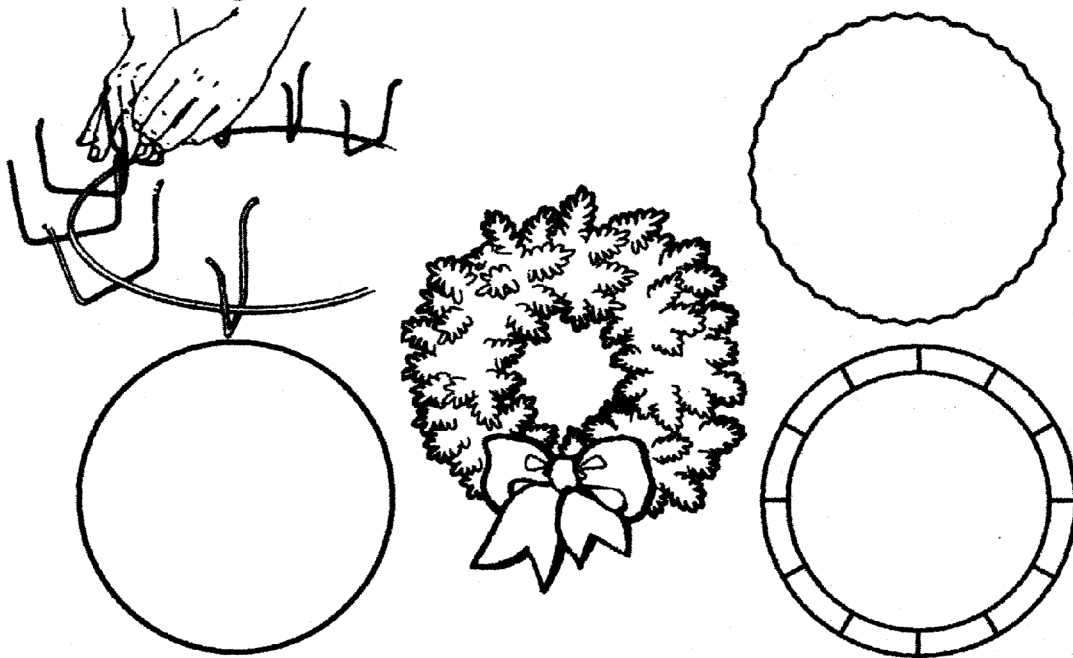
Look for kid friendly planning where spouses are welcome to tag along with their children/grandchildren or choose to take in the meeting. We have a fun family atmosphere with tree house, 60' farm slide, farm animals, hayrides and pony rides. Our farm is both a wholesale and cut your own operation. We hope you can make it to Glove Hollow this Sept 24.

*Mike and Karen Ahern*  
*www.glovehollow.com*

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## Tree Styles (continued)

*Continued from Page 9*

on style doesn't remove existing problems on farms with poor fertility, lime piles, droughty soils, or inferior tree genetics. Trees need to be vigorous to respond effectively to any shearing practice. Quality light-density trees would also depend on good bud-set, branching, and foliage quality. However, a product line designed for the lighter end of the spectrum could utilize such trees more readily without requiring as much shearing or time in the field.

Managing separate value-added product lines is more complex. But so is value-added marketing. Selecting styles of trees prior to

shearing could add a step to production. Shearing trees for different product goals might well require separate shearing crews. Grading separate product lines would definitely add complexity. However, if successful, it could be more money in your pocket.

If we further study our value-added marketing model, i.e. the "fake" tree manufacturers, consider what they would do with our cull trees. Perhaps we too could have the space-saver, half-cone wall-tree or the quarter-cone tree for the corner of the living room.

All it takes in this digital marketing age is a creative concept, a photo on your Web site, and a price to go with it.

## Trading Post

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**FOR SALE:** Owner retiring, selling village cape with 12 acres in Canaan, Vt.; approx. 7,000 Balsam and Fraser Christmas trees and heated wreath shop. Good additional income property. Also, wholesale trees for sale 2011. Call (802) 266-3406 or send e-mail to [charestmyheart@aol.com](mailto:charestmyheart@aol.com)

**WANTED:** 3-point-hitch planting machine. Must work well in sod. Call 802-223-4258 or e-mail [pwhitevt@aol.com](mailto:pwhitevt@aol.com)



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