

Growing Christmas Trees in Newfoundland and Labrador

Overview

Demand for cultivated Christmas trees has grown dramatically in Newfoundland and Labrador in recent years. The preferred species is balsam fir, which occurs in abundance throughout the province. It is estimated that 20,000 cultivated trees are brought into Newfoundland each year, primarily from Nova Scotia. Cutting of wild trees still accounts for a large part of the market. Production of cultivated trees accounts for less than 20% of the local market. A number of growers also produce wreaths for which there is a rapidly growing demand. Essential elements of successful Christmas tree farming are the selection of suitable sites, grower expertise, and markets.

Land

Selection of suitable land is critical to the future success of a Christmas tree farm. Selected sites should have a forest capability rating of moderate to high. It is also preferred to select healthy balsam fir sites with mixed age classes of trees. Forest capability mapping for the province is available from the Department of Forest Resources and Agrifoods offices. Avoid uniform growth sites which would have to be harvested all in one year, or sites requiring extensive planting which will increase cost due to purchase price of seedlings, additional labour costs, and longer time to wait for harvest. Other site selection criteria to consider are:

- Year round accessibility
- Proximity to markets
- Good drainage
- Good tree growth
- Avoid sites with insect or disease damage
- Avoid high moose browse areas
- Avoid wind exposed sites
- Avoid frost pooling areas
- Avoid areas that are steep or rocky
- Keep security and fire risk in mind.

A site assessment form, usually completed by Departmental staff, has been prepared to assist in rating sites. A fact sheet on moose conflicts has been prepared also, which should be considered in selecting and managing a site.

To date, some private land has been developed for Christmas tree production; but most farms are on Crown land leases. If you are interested in Christmas tree farming and do not have private land available, contact the Department of Government Services with respect to applying for suitable Crown land. If approved, title would be in accordance with the Crown Lands Leasing Policy for Agriculture, ie: 50 year agricultural leases, or a 5 year License to Occupy during the initial development stage. Annual rental fees are \$4.00/ha. Buildings necessary for the operation would be subject to individual approval and permitting requirements. Further details on the agricultural leasing policy and lease conditions are available from the Agrifoods Branch of the Forestry and Agrifoods Agency, or the Department of Government Services.

Cultivation

Production of Christmas trees involves application of cultural management techniques throughout the cycle of each crop; which may be up to 9 or 10 years. While Christmas tree production is very labour intensive at certain times of the year, it is estimated that one individual can effectively manage up to approximately 5 acres (2 hectares). This may complement other types of enterprises which have peak labour demands at other times of the year.

Initial site development involves: laying out access trails, thinning dense tree growth, removing competing species, clearing fire breaks, site clean up, and planning security measures and moose controls. Generally

thinning or planting is done to allow for a stocking density of approximately 1200 harvest size trees per acre (3000 per hectare). This density assumes a suggested spacing of at least 6 ft (2 m) per tree. Where all height classes of one to nine feet are represented, allow for 2000 trees per acre (5000 per hectare). Corrective pruning and shearing is then carried out on selected trees remaining after any required thinning has been completed. If infill planting is required consider species such as pine to increase market opportunities. Where possible, leave a minimum of 4 to 6 mature seed trees per acre (10 to 15 per hectare). Minor fertilization, application of pesticides and other cultural controls are necessary to enhance the crop and speed up production. A Pesticide Applicator License is required from the Department of Environment and Conservation for the use of chemical pest controls. Annual site maintenance typically consists of the following:

- Scouting for insect, disease and other damage and taking appropriate corrective measures (regularly)
- Pruning and shearing (July and August)
- Applying fertilizer (June)
- Infill planting (May & June)
- Harvesting (November and December)

A reasonable harvest rate would be approximately 70 trees per acre per year (170 per hectare) on a sustained basis. Care should be taken in harvesting, storing and transporting cut trees to ensure optimum quality. More detailed information is available in grower handbooks and production manuals. Departmental short courses and other training options should also be considered, as this fact sheet provides only a brief overview of Christmas tree production.

Industry Standards

The Maritime Provinces have a Christmas tree grading system overseen by the Maritime Lumber Bureau. The Forestry and Agrifoods Agency emphasizes product quality in brochures, training courses, fact sheets, and production manuals. In the Maritime Provinces, industry takes a lead role in the implementation of standardizing and maintaining product quality. Industry standards are essential in maintaining and expanding markets at competitive prices for the product, which must compete with imported cultivated trees and locally cut wild trees.

Marketing

The most common means of marketing trees locally is at roadside stands, in high traffic areas. Also gaining in popularity are U-Cut or 'Harvest-your-own' operations, especially those which have added features such as sleigh rides, hot beverages, and crafts and wreaths for sale. Agri-tourism concepts such as this are growing in popularity throughout Canada. Selling other value added products and services attracts extra customers, and increases returns on investment. Forestry and Agrifoods Agency newsletters, industry newsletters, and commercial advertising, and the internet should be taken advantage of to promote the industry.

Contacts

The Agrifoods Branch of the Forestry and Agrifoods Agency is the designated agency responsible for Christmas tree initiatives which includes technical support, marketing promotions, farm business management assistance, and staff and producer training. Technical support is also being provided by the Forestry Services Branch. A list of technical and general contacts designated to provide assistance to new entrants and existing producers is available from any office of the Forestry and Agrifoods Agency.

It is recommended that prospective Christmas tree producers consult grower manuals for more detailed information on this topic.

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For further information contact your local Agricultural Representative or Development Officer.