

The Future Greens Market

By Bob Girardin

Many exotic conifers have exquisite foliage, and are perfect candidates for the expanding greens market. At Willow Pond Farm in Sanbornton, NH we had many exotic conifers that we used for greens. Our specialty was our door swags-which were made with foliage from Turkish fir, White pine, Western Red Cedar, Korean fir, Abies amabilis (Pacific Silver fir), Nordmann fir, Corkbark fir, Noble fir and others.



Culture

When you are growing trees for the greens market, make sure you let them grow with limited shearing (mostly corrective) and give them plenty of room. Also if you have experienced some failures with growing some exotic species as Christmas trees instead of cutting them down you might consider using the foliage for greens. That is what I did when I tried to grow Noble fir as a Christmas tree. You will also discover that you can make more money with a particular exotic species if you use the foliage for greens instead of a cut Christmas tree.

Species

The following exotic species lend themselves for swag, wreaths and many other Christmas decorations and I am sure you could find other species that would fit the bill.

Abies amabilis (Pacific silver fir) A most beautiful tree with dense, soft, deep green needles that lie close to the twig and lays flat which makes it perfect for door swags. This tree is hardy and grows best on a Northeast or West facing slopes and it breaks bud late and has excellent needle retention. It also does well in partial shade and it is slow growing (six feet in ten years), but well worth the wait. For us it was the best conifer for our door and window swags. **(See photo)**

Abies koreana (Korean fir) is hardy species that has branchlets crowded with lustrous, deep green needles with whitish bands beneath. The foliage is very distinctive and attractive with its flash of white. It breaks bud late, has a medium growth rate, excellent needle retention and can tolerate many soil types.

Abies procera (Noble fir) is a tree with dense, deep green to bluish green foliage that is somewhat appressed to the branch. Here in the New England noble fir is slow growing, but if you are patient this tree in 10-12 years will begin to produce marketable foliage. It has excellent needle retention.

Thuja plicator (Western Red cedar) is a seed source that I used that originated in British Columbia and is now thriving in the Northeast and Eastern Canada. It is fast growing and has glossy green foliage with cinnamon- red bark beneath. We used the cedar as a finishing touch to our door swags because it lays flat and is very attractive. It is very

important to harvest this cedar before the foliage turns brown. I wait for two good frosts before I take my cuttings.

Abies bornmuelleriana (Turkish fir) is hardy to -25F and has shiny, long, firm, dark green needles- mostly on glabrous branchlets with somewhat resinous buds. This tree does not like heavy soil conditions. It can tolerate dry conditions and has a medium growth rate and excellent needle retention.

Abies nordmanniana (Nordmann fir –Georgia Russia) is hardy to –25F and breaks bud late and has beautiful, dark green foliage and it grows well on heavy soils. Growth rate is slow to medium and has excellent needle retention.

How We Make Our Swags (See photo)

1. I wait until we have experienced two good frosts
2. I harvest the necessary foliage
3. I make sure I choose foliage that has a tendency to lie flat
4. I lay out the foliage in order of application on a bench
5. I place three branchlets or more, so that there is enough foliage to fill in the space, of *Abies amabilis* or other foliage in my hand in a heart shape form
6. I cut the wood ends of the foliage to about 3”
7. I place 3 or 4 short tips of foliage usually using one of the following species of Nordmann, Noble, Korean or Corkbark fir about 5-6” long to cover up the cut ends. I am still holding all of these cuttings in one hand
8. I place one branchlet of Western Red Cedar about 10-12” long as the final foliage placement

9. Still holding all of the foliage in one hand I grab a piece of double loop wire (You can purchase from Kelco along with the necessary tool to twist the wire) and wrap it around the foliage where it joins all the ends and use the tool to twist it tight. I use the resulting loop as a hanger for the swag



10 Total time around 5 minutes

11 Then you use your own expertise to decorate it

Conclusion

There are many other species that have exquisite foliage. As growers of exotics, I am sure you will choose foliage from your own exotic plantings to make beautiful Christmas decorations that your customers will cherish. We have seen some beautiful wreaths made with Turkish and Nordmann fir. Finally it is imperative that you choose foliage from trees that have good needle retention. Good luck.

Photos

The photos were taken at Fox Christmas Tree Farm (Formerly Willow Pond Farm). The swags were made by Denise Fox with *Abies amabilis* (Pacific Silver Fir) and the tips were made with Nordmann fir and the final piece was Western Red Cedar. The foliage photo was of a branch of *Abies amabilis*.

