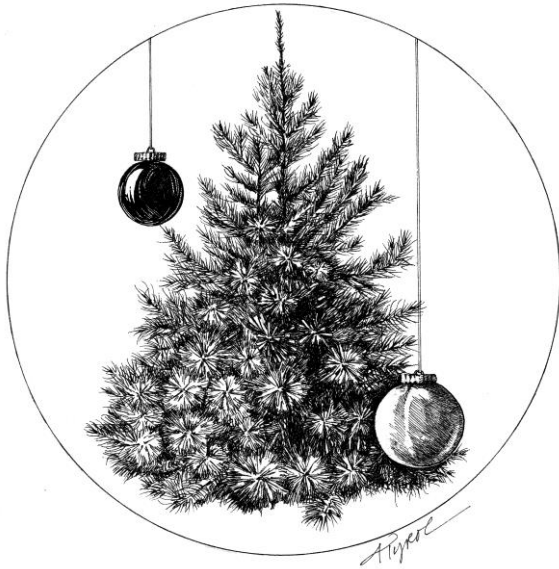


The Outside Story



The Trees of Christmas Past and Future By: Patrick White

You picked it out, maybe cut it down, brought it home, watered it, and decorated it. But do you know what species of tree that is surrounded by presents in your living room?

If you purchased your Christmas tree rather than cutting it out of the woods, chances are it's either a balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*) or a Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*) – these are the two species most commonly grown on Christmas tree farms in northern New England. Balsam fir is found naturally everywhere, from Alberta to Pennsylvania, and has the largest range of any North American fir species. It's perhaps best known for its aroma – when people say they want a tree that smells like Christmas, they're talking about a balsam. Fraser fir, native to the Appalachian Mountains, doesn't have the same trademark scent, but it does have a little more

visual flourish in the form of elegant blue-green needles with silvery-white undersides.

Of course, these weren't always the two most popular Christmas tree species in our region. Decades ago, Christmas tree growers were more likely to be planting and selling white pine (*Pinus strobus*), which when sheared can have a beautiful shape, but its long needles can be messy and its branches too weak to support most decorations. White spruce (*Picea glauca*) also had its moment, despite its painfully sharp needles and an aroma that smells not so much like Christmas as cat urine. Some were even growing Scotch (or Scots) pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), an import from Eurasia that's beautiful over there, but for some reason grows so gangly over here that it was likely Charles Schulz's inspiration for the original Charlie Brown Christmas tree.

As with anything, trends come and go and tastes change. Customer preference, though, is only one of the reasons for the evolving mix of species being grown as Christmas trees. The other has to do with how well different species grow in our climate and in specific soils. One tree that has gained popularity in recent years and is now found on many Christmas tree farms is Canaan fir (pronounced "ka-NAIN," with emphasis on the last syllable), which originated in the Canaan Valley of West Virginia. In reality, Canaan fir is a type of balsam fir, and for simplicity that's the way many farms label it, but there are some important differences that have made Canaan firs popular with growers: they grow better in wetter soils than most other balsams and they break bud later, too, so they're less susceptible to late-spring frosts and early growing season pests such as balsam twig aphid.

In the coming years, you can expect to see different species of trees at your local Christmas tree farm as growers continue the search for trees that perform well in the field and appeal

to customers. About six years ago, I had a chance to speak with Bob Girardin, a retired school teacher who at the time operated Willow Pond Farm in Sanbornton, New Hampshire. He'd been on a one-man crusade to promote the idea of growing and selling "exotic" Christmas tree species, that is, tree species native to other parts of the world. "People are slow to change, especially here in New England," he told me. "I would write and write, but there wasn't much interest. It was hard just to get invited to go speak at a meeting of growers."

That's all changed, and these days many Christmas tree growers are at least experimenting with "exotics." In the Northeast, that list includes Korean fir (*Abies koreana*), which has stunning and showy white undersides to its branches; Corkbark fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*), which is extremely cold-hardy and boasts a distinctive blue-green appearance; Meyer spruce (*Picea meyeri*), which is native to China, also has a blue-green appearance, and offers excellent needle retention (a characteristic lacking in most spruce); and Veitch fir (*Abies veitchii*), which comes from Japan and has been found to tolerate both cold weather and low-pH soils.

Another relatively recent development is for nurseries and researchers to hybridize these exotics with native or more traditionally grown species. For example, genetically crossing balsam fir with Korean fir to harness the best growing and appearance characteristics of each. The Exotic Conifer Association (www.exoticconifer.com), a national organization, has been formed to "educate, collect, and disseminate information from the experience of growing non-invasive exotic conifers as Christmas trees and ornamentals."

In Girardin's opinion, interest in exotic Christmas trees has taken off because they "offer something different, and something better." He said this is especially true for growers who have begun to experience problems with *phytophthora* and *Armillaria* root rot diseases, particularly when trying to grow Fraser fir. "Even the naysayers are now convinced. If you live on one species, you die on one species." While the exotic species that are being experimented with appear to offer improved resistance to some diseases and insects, and don't appear to be invasive, only time will tell how they will perform over the long-term on Christmas tree farms and in the larger environment.

One thing seems likely: when you go to look for a Christmas tree in the future, there will be more of a variety of species to choose from. Variety is the spice of life, after all, and spice isn't reserved just for eggnog this time of year.

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