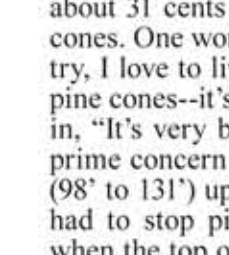


Christmas Trees

THE PULSE OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE INDUSTRY

When Cone Picking is Dangerous Exploring Soils! A Grand Fir Seed Orchard



International Perspective

When Cone Picking is Dangerous

by Catherine Howard, Editor

Some of the finest cones in the world come from northwest Georgia near a place called Tlugi. This is one of the poorest areas of the country with most families living on less than \$3/day. After having been subjected to Soviet rule with severe economic, social, and political consequences, Georgians are struggling to get back on their feet again. Unemployment is high in Georgia at 35.5%. Locally, there are few employment opportunities so men collect Nordman fir (*Abies nordmanniana*) pine cones. The cone pickers get paid about 31 cents for 1 kilogram (about 2.2 pounds) of cones. One worker told BBC News, "I love my country, I love to live here, but I don't like collecting the pine cones—it's a tough job." Another worker chimed in, "It's very bad. It's a very low price." Safety is a prime concern when the pickers climb 30-40 meters (98' to 131') up into the trees. Picker Shota Tomadze had to stop picking cones after a serious accident when the top of the tree broke and he dropped about 130'. He doesn't remember anything after the fall. Now age 70, Tomadze has trouble walking, and he is in constant pain. Tomadze's son stopped picking cones after he witnessed the fall and death of his best friend. In September 2010, Ivane Kharebavshvili, 54, plunged to his death with a brain injury from a 30 meter tree when he was climbing without safety equipment. Picker Giorgi Dvali was quoted as saying, "We have never been offered equipment. But of course we would like to have it." A director of a large Danish seed company estimates that 30-40 percent of his 155 employees use the safety equipment on a regular basis. However, he says that many of the pickers "...find the equipment impractical or find it hinders their work, and I cannot force them to wear it." Some seed buyers insist that all workers wear full protective equipment and go through training, but it is not easy to enforce the rules.

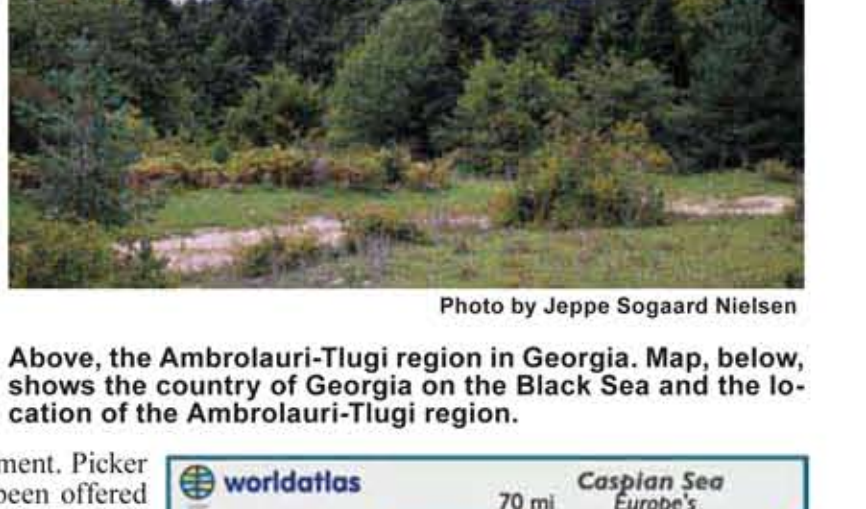
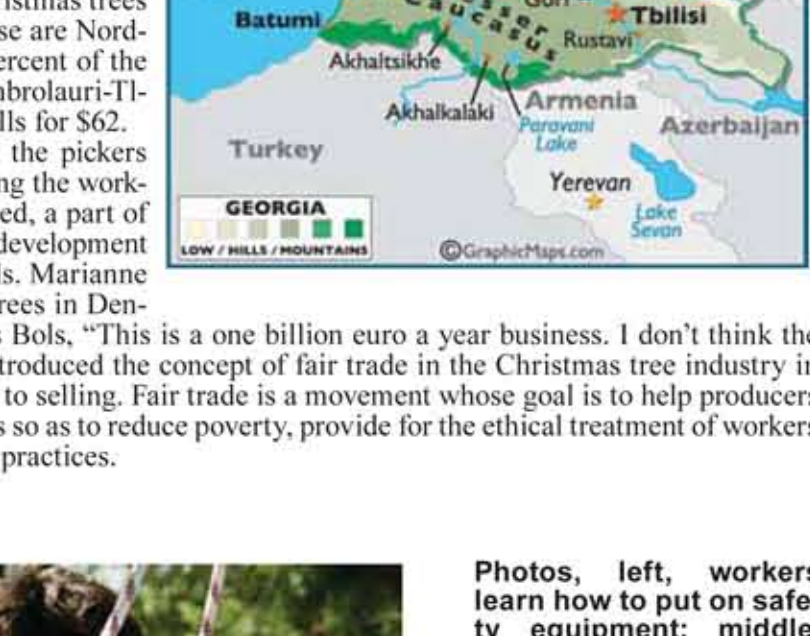


Photo by Jeppe Sogaard Nielsen

A picker demonstrated how the seeds were collected. Without any climbing equipment or protective gear, he put on a pair of gloves and pulled himself into a tree. In just a few seconds time he was 60' up in the tree. He pulled off the cones and threw them to the ground where his fellow workers collected the cones.

According to the BBC, more than eight million Christmas trees are sold annually in the UK, and more than half of those are Nordman fir grown from Georgian seeds. More than 80 percent of the Christmas trees sold in Europe are from seeds in the Ambrolauri-Tlugi region in Georgia. The average Nordman fir tree sells for \$62.

One Christmas tree supplier is working to assist the pickers and their families by creating more local jobs and paying the workers more than the going rate. When Fair Trees® are used, a part of the price of every tree sold is sent back to Tlugi for development projects like dental care for children, books, and schools. Marianne Bols, who with her husband Lars H. grow Christmas trees in Denmark, eventually wants to grow trees in Georgia. Says Bols, "This is a one billion euro a year business. I don't think the Georgian government has been aware of that." Bols introduced the concept of fair trade in the Christmas tree industry in 2007—ensuring that the process is ethical from picking to selling. Fair trade is a movement whose goal is to help producers in developing countries get a fair price for their products so as to reduce poverty, provide for the ethical treatment of workers and farmers, and promote environmentally sustainable practices.



Above, the Ambrolauri-Tlugi region in Georgia. Map, below, shows the Ambrolauri-Tlugi region on the Black Sea and the location of the Ambrolauri-Tlugi region.

Christmas Trees • 6



Photos, left, workers learn how to put on safety equipment; middle, the logo for Fair Trees; lower left, the inside of a Nordman fir cone; bottom, Fair Trees Marianne Bols, owner of Bols Forstplanteskole, Braedstrup, Denmark. All photos by Jeppe Sogaard Nielsen except photo of Marianne by Jeanette Volmer.



Fair Trees appeals to a growing group of conscience-driven consumers who, when buying Fair Trade products, have the opportunity to contribute to supporting less fortunate people. Fair Trees might be a good alternative to our customers who are looking for organic or natural trees. The Bols website lists these additional advantages to selling Fair Trees by giving Christmas

Continued on page 10



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Winter 2012 • 7

When Cone Picking is Dangerous

Continued from page 7

- tree retailers the opportunity to:
1. deliver a beautiful, attractive, and well-proportioned Christmas tree of the highest quality - on the outside as well as the inside
 2. market a Christmas tree produced under proper conditions all the way from seed to tree
 3. meet a growing demand from consumers
 4. have an added selling point... for the same price

Fair Trees offers a model for environmentally and ethically aware Christmas tree growers. The organization secured ten annual licenses to harvest 16 tons of seeds from the scenically magnificent Ambrolauri-Tlugi region of Georgia. This corresponds to 25 percent of the total licenses available. The price is the same as non-Fair Trade approved seeds and plants.

All cone pickers have health insurance for their families, decent working conditions, must take safety training, and must wear safety equipment.

Additionally, a cornerstone of the Fair Trade program is transparent certification with the Georgian Ministry of Economic Affairs. Each part of the agreement specifies quality control from the origin of the seeds to the final processing. All Georgian laws are adhered to. Quality control is audited by an impartial third party that inspects working conditions and the collection and production of pine cones.

All Fair Trade approved label attached to them with a short text about the advantages of Fair Trade products. Everyone who is willing to comply with the Fair Trees requirements can participate. The standards are: 1) work toward Global G.A.P. (Good Agricultural Practices) approval (or equivalent certification) for your company, 2) commit to growing Fair Trade trees in the future and, 3) obey the laws of the producing country - fair working conditions and wage agreements.

The World Fair Trade Organization WTO <www.wfto.com> which works with 110 million farmers, artisans, retailers, and supporters with over 359 members has 10 Principles that Fair Trade Organizations must

follow in their day-to-day work and carries out monitoring to ensure these principles are upheld:

Principle One: Creating Opportunities for Economically Disadvantaged Producers
Poverty reduction through trade forms a key part of the organization's aims. The organization supports marginalized small producers, whether these are independent family businesses, or grouped in associations or co-operatives. It seeks to enable them to move from income insecurity and poverty to economic self-sufficiency and ownership. The organization has a plan of action to carry this out.

Principle Two: Transparency and Accountability
The organization is transparent in its management and commercial relations. It is accountable to all its stakeholders and respects the sensitivity and confidentiality of commercial information supplied. The organization finds appropriate, participatory ways to involve employees, members, and producers in its decision-making processes. It ensures that relevant information is provided to all its trading partners. The communication channels are good and open at all levels of the supply chain.

Principle Three: Fair Trading Practices
The organization trades with concern for the social, economic, and environmental well-being of marginalized small producers and does not maximize profit at their expense. It is responsible and professional in meeting its commitments in a timely manner. Suppliers respect contracts and deliver products on time and to the desired quality and specifications.
Fair Trade buyers recognizing the financial disadvantages producers and suppliers face, ensure orders are paid on receipt of documents and according to the attached guidelines. An interest free pre-payment of at least 50% is made if requested.
Where southern Fair Trade suppliers receive a pre-payment from buyers, they ensure that this payment is passed on to the producers or farmers who make or grow their Fair Trade products.

Buyers consult with suppliers before canceling or rejecting orders. Where orders are cancelled through no fault of producers or suppliers, adequate compensation is guaranteed for work already done. Suppliers and producers consult with buyers if there is a problem with delivery and ensure compensation is provided when delivered quantities and qualities do not match those invoiced.

The organization maintains long term relationships based on solidarity, trust, and mutual respect that contribute to the promotion and growth of Fair Trade. It maintains effective communication with its trading partners. Parties involved in a trading relationship seek to increase the volume of the trade between them and the value and diversity of their product offer as a means of growing Fair Trade for the producers in order to increase their incomes. The organization works cooperatively with the other Fair Trade Organizations in country and avoids unfair competition. It avoids duplicating the designs of patterns of other organizations without permission.

Fair Trade recognizes, promotes and protects the cultural identity and traditional skills of small producers as reflected in their craft designs, food products, and other related services.

Principle Four: Payment of a Fair Price
A fair price is one that has been mutually agreed by all through dialogue and participation, which provides fair pay to the producers, and can also be sustained by the market. Where Fair Trade pricing structures exist, these are used as a minimum. Fair pay means provision of socially acceptable remuneration (in the local context) considered by producers themselves to be fair and which takes into account the principle of equal pay for equal work by women and men. Fair Trade marketing and importing organizations support capacity building as required to producers to enable them to set a fair price.

Principle Five: Ensuring No Child Labor and Forced Labor
The organization adheres to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and national/local laws on the employment of children. It ensures the labor in its workforce and/or members or homeworkers.

Organizations who buy Fair Trade products from producer groups either

directly or through intermediaries ensure that no forced labor is used in production and the producer complies with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and national/local laws on the employment of children. Any involvement of children in the production of Fair Trade products (including learning a traditional art or craft) is always disclosed and monitored and does not adversely affect the children's well-being, security, educational requirements, and need for play.

Principle Six: Commitment to Non-Discrimination, Gender Equity, and Freedom of Association
The organization does not discriminate in hiring, remuneration, access to training, promotion, termination, or retirement based on race, caste, national origin, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, union membership, political affiliation, HIV/AIDS, status, or age. The organization provides opportunities for women and men to develop their skills and actively promotes applications from women for job vacancies and for leadership positions in the organization. The organization takes into account the special health and safety needs of pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. Women fully participate in decisions concerning the use of benefits accruing from the production process.

The organization respects the right of all employees to form and join trade unions of their choice and to bargain collectively. Where the right to join trade unions and bargain collectively is restricted by law and/or political environment, the organization will enable means of independent and free association and bargaining for employees. The

organization develops the skills and capabilities of its own employees or members. Small producers develop specific activities to help these producers improve their management skills, markets—local, regional, international, Fair Trade, and mainstream as appropriate. Organizations which buy Fair Trade products through Fair Trade intermediaries in the South assist these organizations to develop their capacity to support the marginalized producer groups that they work with.

Principle Nine: Promoting Fair Trade
The organization raises awareness of the aim of Fair Trade and of the need for greater justice in world trade through Fair Trade. It advocates for the objectives and activities of Fair Trade according to the scope of the organization. The organization provides its customers with information about itself, the products it markets, and the producer organizations or members that make or harvest the products. Honest advertising and marketing techniques are always used.

Principle Ten: Respect for the Environment
Organizations which produce Fair Trade products maximize the use of raw materials from sustainability managed sources in their ranges buying locally when possible. They use production technologies that seek to reduce energy consumption and where possible use renewable energy technologies that minimize greenhouse gas emissions. They seek to minimize the impact of their waste stream on the environment. Fair Trade agricultural commodity producers minimize their environmental impacts

organization ensures that representatives of employees are not subject to discrimination in the workplace.

Organizations working directly with producers ensure that women are always paid for their contribution to the production process, and when women do the same work as men they are paid at the same rates as men. Organizations also seek to ensure that in production situations where women's work is valued less highly than men's work, women's work is re-valued to equalize pay rates and women are allowed to undertake work according to their capacities.

Principle Seven: Ensuring Good Working Conditions
The organization provides a safe and healthy working environment for employees and/or members. It complies, at a minimum, with national and local laws and ILO (International Labour Organization) conventions on health and safety.

Working hours and conditions for employees and/or members (and any homeworkers) comply with conditions established by national and local laws and ILO conventions.

Fair Trade Organizations are aware of the health and safety conditions in the producer groups they buy from. They seek, on an ongoing basis, to raise awareness of health and safety issues and improve health and safety practices in producer groups.

Principle Eight: Providing Capacity Building
The organization seeks to increase positive developmental impacts for small, marginalized producers through Fair Trade.

For the horticulturist, the bracted balsam found in the Canaan Valley of West Virginia is a fascinating example of an ecotype or ecotype. Ecotypes are variations from the original species occurring naturally only in specific growing conditions and regions. Those bracted balsams growing higher in the mountains of West Virginia are growing in significantly different conditions than those found further north, and were given the common name Canaan fir, even though both they and the bracted fir have the same botanical name. The botanical varietal name *phanerolepis* means conspicuous scales, re-

fering to the fact that the bracts of the fir's seeds can be seen extending from its cones while the cones are still closed.

The cone difference is not the only morphological difference between regular balsam and bracted balsam fir. The needles spread out around the twigs and branches, giving a "bottle-brush" appearance rather than the more horizontal placement of standard balsam firs. The trees can vary somewhat in needle colour, ranging from deep green to blue-green, with silvery-white stomatal bands on the undersides of their needles. However, bracted balsam trees share the same traditional pyramidal shape of many firs, often quite densely branched and full before they are applied.

What's the appeal of the bracted balsam for Christmas tree growers and nurseries? According to Jim Verboom of Nova Tree Seed, the tree's toughness makes it an excellent choice for more northerly locales. "This tree breaks its buds later in the spring than its related species, so it's more resistant to frost injury," he says. "It also grows in areas that aren't well suited for Fraser or straight balsam firs, including along coastal areas." Although tolerant of wet soil, the bracted balsam does best in well-drained, humus-rich, acidic soils that receive adequate moisture.

Rick Eastman operates Western Maine Nurseries, supplying evergreen seedlings and plug seedlings to Christmas tree growers, garden centre nurseries, and others looking for large quantities of evergreen seedlings. "The bracted balsam has a full bottle-brush needle structure, which makes for a fuller looking tree," he says. "Also, the colour is as good or better than Fraser fir, in my opinion." He says his customers are getting more familiar with the bracted balsam, and he feels that the fast-growing tree "is the tree to have in the Northeast where you cannot grow Fraser fir."

Jim Nickelson of Needlefast Evergreens in Michigan also likes the bracted balsam because of its natural tendency to a fuller needle structure on its branches. "This makes the tree more appealing after trimming for its Christmas tree appearance," he says. "As a nursery that supplies planting stock to other Christmas tree growers, we are noticing that more people are asking for the bracted balsam wanting to try them out." The Verbooms hope this is a trend that continues for years to come.

Marianne Bols knows English and can be reached at: mb@bolsforst.dk

Christmas Trees • 12

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Winter 2012 • 11

Bracted Balsam—A Growing Interest

by Jodi DeLong

Nothing says Christmas quite like a freshly cut, well-pruned, and fragrant fir tree lovingly decorated by family members and enjoyed throughout the holiday season. Many people think immediately of Fraser or balsam firs when they think of Christmas trees. Recently, a closely related variety of balsam fir, the bracted balsam (*Abies balsamea* var. *phanerolepis*) is growing in popularity with many Christmas tree growers and their customers.

Jim and Karen Verboom operate Nova Tree Company, based in Truro, Nova Scotia. Jim says they first became interested in the bracted balsam in 1986, when the North American Christmas Tree Growers association held a meeting in Halifax, NS. "Someone was talking about bracted balsam, and we realized that we had the same variety growing on the Eastern shore of Nova Scotia, and within several kilometers of the shoreline, where regular balsam does not grow well," he says. "We found a good stand of the trees and began collecting seed to offer as part of our catalogue. Despite being higher priced than other seed varieties, it's been steadily growing in popularity."

Botanists and plant taxonomists sometimes quibble over the classification of bracted balsam fir with some people maintaining that it is a separate species while others assert that both it and the Fraser fir are varieties of the original balsam fir. Bracted balsam is found in cooler areas than common balsam will often grow, including Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, extending through Quebec and into Ontario in Canada. In the United States, bracted balsam is a tree of the northeast, extending as far south as West Virginia and Virginia.

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