North Carolina Christmas Tree Association Celebrates 50th Anniversary

The North Carolina Christmas Tree Association (NCCTA) will be celebrating its 50th anniversary at the Summer Meeting to be held September 24-26, 2009. NC Cooperative Extension will be assisting with educational programs and the Saturday farm tour. There will also be a trade show on Friday, offering participants networking and educational opportunities. There will be one price for all attendee registrations, and registration is encouraged by September 15th. If you have questions about the celebration or need more information, call NCCTA at 800-562-8789 or locally at 262-5826.

Thursday, September 24, 2009
Anniversary Reception at La Quinta, 7-8:30 PM (FREE EVENT)

Friday, September 25, 2009
NCCTA Business Meeting/Trade-show/Educational Meetings, Boone United Methodist Church, beginning at 8 AM

Saturday, September 26, 2009
Farm Tours leave Boone United Methodist Church at 8 AM sharp. Arrive at 7:30 AM to park your personal car and load buses. Topics include: Elongate Hemlock Scale, Roundup PowerMAX Mistblower Trial, Shearing Research Demonstration, Creating Wildlife Habitats, Choose and Cut in Watauga County, Freeze Damage, and Equipment Demonstrations (including historical equipment*). The farm tour has been approved for 1.5 hours of pesticide credits in the following categories: G, L, N, O, D and X.

*If you have old equipment that you would like to display at the 50th NCCTA Anniversary, contact David Tucker at 828-406-6305.

Hotel Accommodations
The hotels are side-by-side in Boone, off of Highway 105 Extension. The special rate for NCCTA ends September 17, 2009. For non-smokers: La Quinta Inn - $63.75 per night plus tax at 262-1234. For smokers: Sleep Inn Boone - $63.75 per night plus tax at 262-0020.
The WNC AgOptions Grant Program has announced the 2010 funding cycle. Grants totaling $225,000 are available to western North Carolina farmers who are diversifying or expanding their farming operations in 2010. WNC Agricultural Options will award approximately 45 farmers in 17 counties and the Cherokee Reservation $3,000, $6,000 or $9,000 grant awards. Managed by the N.C. Cooperative Extension County Centers in the West District, the WNC AgOptions program works with producers who demonstrate ways to increase farm income to other transitioning farmers, particularly tobacco growers. WNC AgOptions works in partnership with RAFl-USA’s Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund, and the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission sponsors the program.

“The partnership we have with the WNC AgOptions program is very valuable to us,” said William Upchurch, Executive Director of the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission. “Our experience has shown that participating farmers utilize these grants for innovative, resourceful and profitable enterprises that can make a huge impact on their farming operation.”

Recent recipients are transitioning from commercial to direct markets, extending their growing seasons, or developing value-added processing systems so that they will have a product to sell year-round. Other WNC AgOptions recipients use the funds to offset the financial risk of trying untested, unique endeavors, such as hops production. A complete list of past funded projects can be found on the AgOptions website (www.wncagoptions.org).

Interested applicants should see the agricultural agents at their local Extension Centers by November 23 and can visit www.wncagoptions.org to download an application. Projects should increase the sale of farm products and lead to the long-term sustainability of the farm business. The postmark deadline for applications is January 8, 2010.

Established in 2003, WNC AgOptions is entering its sixth funding cycle. Members of the WNC AgOptions Steering Committee include: representatives from N.C. Cooperative Extension program, N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services – Marketing Division, HandMade in America, Appalachian Sustainable Agricultural Project, former WNC AgOptions recipients and other leaders in agribusiness.

USDA Value-Added Producer Grants

The USDA Value-Added Producer Grant Program (VAPG) is now accepting applications for funding. Grants may be used for planning activities and for working capital for marketing value-added agricultural products and for farm-based renewable energy. Eligible applicants are independent producers, farmer and rancher cooperatives, agricultural producer groups, and majority-controlled producer-based business ventures. In 2008, Blue Ridge Food Ventures, the Canola Farmers Group, and Holly Grove Farms received VAPG funds totaling a collective $183,000. If you have an idea for a VAPG or for more information about the program, contact your State Rural Development Office to obtain additional information and assistance. In North Carolina, you may contact Bruce Pleasant through the contact information below:

USDA Rural Development
4405 Bland Rd., Ste. 260
Raleigh, NC 27609
Phone: (919) 873-2031
Email: bruce.pleasant@nc.usda.gov

Mr. Pleasant is willing to provide assistance to anyone wanting to discuss a potential project, and he can also assist in reviewing applications for completeness and eligibility. Applications that are not eligible or complete and received by the deadline will not be considered for funding. The deadline for submitting applications is November 30, 2009, for reserved and unreserved funds.

Additional information can be viewed on the USDA website (www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/coops/vadg.htm).
2009 Christmas Tree Marketing Report:  
"Snarled Traffic on Major Thoroughfares -- Expect Delays"

(Written by Jeff Owen, NCSU Christmas Tree Specialist, and Bill Glenn, NCDA Marketing Specialist)

Christmas tree markets are far different from a highway system, but neither work well around a bottleneck. Last year, we probably sold as many trees as normal, if not a few more -- we just had more we wanted to move. Now, two years into an oversupply and a recession, Christmas tree buyers are getting lots of calls from other suppliers about potential bargains. Even loyal customers have to re-think how they are going to handle their purchase of wholesale trees. It all takes time. When you have more drivers on the road shopping for bargains, there is going to be a traffic jam!

There are patterns we can learn from, however. Bargain shopping takes time and sales will come very late. Tree prices have typically strengthened late in the season other years when buyers cannot find the quality or service they need from the bargain-sellers. Last year, more than one grower was rewarded for keeping a "poker-face" early, not panicking, and waiting until late October or even into November to close a deal! Several growers held firm on their prices last year and moved what they needed to. 2009 may be a different year, but price-cutting shouldn't be the first or only strategy employed.

Several old-timers have said that past recessions were good for retail Christmas tree sales. People stay home. They focus on the traditional Christmas theme. They buy a real tree. It might be smaller than last year's, but it is the symbol for the season. In this recession, the majority of families that held on to their home (and its cathedral ceiling) will still need a tree to fill it. There is hope.

Buyers will likely hedge their bets by ordering low, but then if sales are good, they will need to re-order late. There were a lot of late-season orders last year; plan for more of the same this year. Growers have traditionally backed off from marketing when they get ready for harvest, but with a late year, some late season advertising could really pay off. More than one grower hit the road in late November last year to make more contacts for sales this year.

Part of the preparation for late season orders is to be flexible. How can you better accommodate customers? A lot of customer service involves what you can provide with trucking. Can you build a full load from several partial loads? While your customers may be ordering small to manage their finances, a side benefit is that trees cut later will be fresher at Christmas. Be sure to play the freshness card as you market your services. If you don't do well on the phone, hire someone with the appropriate skills.

Of course, we all need a dose of reality. Some growers turned away viable offers last year as a result of an inflated perception of their own crop's value. Stumpage prices should be less than FOB - less the cost of marketing, harvest, and a profit margin for the re-wholesaler. Number twos should be less than ones or premiums. In 2008, there was a $16 spread in the price of 6-7 foot Frasers in NC. Part perception, part reality. Where do your trees fit in?

Several growers put a positive spin on the oversupply. With a little honesty, they admit to lowering standards of quality and cutting below grade in past years. Now is an "opportunity" to improve your grade and your reputation for quality. Cull the culls instead of putting a #2 ribbon in them. Give an average for your size class with as many six-foot-eleven-inch trees as six-foot-one-inch trees. Be sure to tell your customers!

If we look for the best analogy for Christmas tree markets, it might be a Christmas tree itself. It takes a long time to grow a quality tree or a quality market. It's not "rocket science" but you have to do things in a timely way before harvest. Advertising, going to trade shows, keeping a website, and investing in customer relationships happen annually (just like planting, fertilizing, and pest control). Neither trees nor markets grow themselves!


Do what you need to do, but think twice before you cave in to a bargain hunter. Cutting price may be the simplest way to go, but it shouldn't be the first thing you do.
Protecting Pollinators

(Information provided by USDA National Agroforestry Center, AF Note – 35)

With over 100 crops in North America reliant on pollinators for maximal production, it’s important that everyone, from farmers to homeowners to landscapers, makes an effort to protect dwindling native pollinator populations, as well as honey bee colonies kept by commercial beekeepers and hobbyists. One of the most obvious ways to limit negative affects on pollinators is to scout for insect pests to determine if pesticide treatments are warranted.

NCSU, along with other land-grant universities, has spent a great deal of time and money establishing pest threshold levels for damaging insects on a wide assortment of crops. These thresholds are available to help producers avoid unnecessary treatments, thereby saving money and environmental risks. Your local Cooperative Extension agent can assist you in employing pest threshold levels in your farm management.

Insecticides are tricky in the sense that they are designed to kill insects, including honeybees and other native pollinators. Some products are more toxic to bees than others, and there are many ways that insecticides can harm pollinators. Some products kill bees on contact, while others have a more cumulative effect, poisoning the young developing bee larvae as residues accumulate in the wax. Additionally, as bees gather food or nesting material, they can collect recently sprayed plant, which can also lead to contamination. It is also known that some pesticide products can disorient bees, affecting their ability to locate their nest or affecting their ability to fly.

The USDA recommends several best management practices to help pollinator populations:

REDUCE DRIFT: Never spray when there are windy conditions. The slightest breeze can carry fine spray particles to unintended areas. Windbreaks, hedgerows, and buffers around your fields will also help protect surrounding areas.

PROVIDE REFUGE AREAS: Windbreaks, hedgerows, and buffers around the field can also serve as a refuge area during pesticide applications, provided no drift moves into these buffer zones. These areas can also provide important habitat for pollinators. Native plants in buffer zones can also provide valuable forage for bees.

INCREASE HABITAT FOR BENEFICIAL INSECTS: The more beneficial insects you have in your field, the better chance you have that natural controls will keep pest populations in check. Groundcovers in the tree field are essential for beneficial insects.

REDUCE THE IMPACT FROM PESTICIDES: Choose products that have a specific pest target over those that are broad-spectrum insecticides. Also use formulations of pesticides that are safer for bees, such as granulars, solutions, or soluble powders. Dusts, wettable powders, and emulsifiable concentrates are the most hazardous to pollinators.

TIME APPLICATIONS APPROPRIATELY: Crops in bloom attract bees, so avoid spraying these crops. Time pesticide applications for the evening after foraging bees have returned to their nests. However, remember that many pesticides have residuals that can still harm pollinators after the actual spray event.

FOLLOW THE LABEL: Never apply pesticides at rates higher than the label. Follow all the recommended guidelines provided on the label. Failure to do so is against federal law.

COMMUNICATE: Finally, if you are near neighbors or landowners that keep honeybees, it is important to alert the beekeeper prior to a pesticide treatment so that precautions can be taken such as moving the bees to a different area.

Together we can all take efforts to improve the future of pollinator populations. With every third bite of food we eat, we are directly and intimately linked to these often-overlooked species. Pollinators are one gauge of our long-term sustainability. For more information on pollinators and their global decline, visit the Pollinator Project at www.pollinator.org or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at http://www.fws.gov/Pollinators/.
This past spring we observed encouraging results with Balsam Twig Aphid (BTA) control from treatments made in the summer and fall of 2008. To summarize the results of last year’s experience, Talstar sprayed in August, September and November controlled BTA for many area growers. In research trials conducted by Dr. Jill Sidebottom, fall applications for Balsam Twig Aphid controls proved very successful, however only the August applications of Talstar led to a minor Hemlock rust mite (HRM) problem in one research plot. The earlier in the three-month window the Talstar is applied, the more likely a HRM population will be generated for the spring. Other products that showed good BTA control include Mavrik and Thionex. In past years, Thionex has showed variations in BTA control. No matter the product you use, a fall pesticide treatment should ALWAYS be monitored for effectiveness the following spring. Pest scouting is the ONLY way to know if a treatment worked.

If you are not able to treat during this three-month window, there are indications that Talstar will control the BTA eggs from November through March as well. As this new treatment window is further researched, both by NCSU researchers and individual farmers, everyone should keep careful notes and communicate your efforts. There may be hidden glitches in this plan, and they’ll probably be found out the hard way.

At the least, we may, one day, find one of our pests develop a tolerance to a commonly used pesticide such as Talstar. One thing we can do is MINIMIZE the number of Talstar applications applied per rotation. The easiest way to do that is to hold off on using this strategy until the trees get large enough to truly require a BTA treatment or until they really need a BWA treatment.

Letting nature take care of Spruce spider mites (SSM) and BTA damage the first 3-4 years in a rotation is often possible. Only in a few fields today will SSM reach high enough levels to damage trees severely. Your groundcovers have had a great beneficial effect on reducing SSM damage these last five years or more. Take advantage of that. Save your money and help keep our chemical tools effective.

Scouting Reminders

Hemlock Rust Mite
Rust mites appear in the spring and fall when our weather is cooler. Due to the cool summer we’ve experienced, it’s important to take the time to scout for rust mites in your trees. They are extremely small and are best identified with the use of a hand lens. They almost look like small worms and can be clear, tan, cream, or orange-colored. They are usually found on the underside of the needles, and as many as a hundred mites can be on one needle!

If rust mite populations are very heavy, trees will take on a bronzy appearance, and in extreme situations, needles can fall off. Rust mite populations can increase rapidly.

A few rust mites on a shoot will not cause damage, so it’s important to pay attention to treatment thresholds when deciding whether or not a treatment is warranted. Both the percentage of trees with rust mites and the total number of mites on the heaviest infested needle are considered with the threshold. For a pesticide treatment to be necessary, at least 80% of the shoots you look at should have mites on them (a counter and scouting sheet can help you record this information while you’re scouting). AND at least 8 mites are seen on one single needle. If either of these conditions isn’t met, then it’s unlikely you need to treat for the mites.

If you do need to treat for rust mites, horticultural oil is a good product to use, however there are some issues with phytotoxicity. Dimethoate is often recommended for rust mites, however if there are lots of eggs, it may not fully control the population. Envidor is a new miticide that is

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also labeled for rust mites as well as spider mites. Interestingly, if you use synthetic pyrethroids such as Asana, Astro, and Talstar for Balsam Woolly Adelgid treatments in the fall, often times this will create a hemlock rust mite problem the following spring. One more reason to make sure you’re scouting throughout each season!

**Cinaras Aphids**
Cinaras are large aphids that live in colonies and usually appear brown or black. Cinaras rarely cause damage on trees, but they can be a headache as a post-harvest pest. They easily reproduce in the warm environment of a customer’s home, and when squashed, they leave a purplish stain on carpet, upholstery, and other surfaces. Like all aphids, Cinaras can produce live young, so it’s important to scout early on your market trees.

Cinaras tend to congregate on the terminal, first whorl of branches, and the trunk. Wasps, bees, and ants can help you find the Cinaras, as these insects are attracted to the honeydew produced by the aphids. You can also scout trees during harvest, reminding employees to check their hands and gloves for purplish stains which would indicate live Cinaras. Tree shakers are also effective at revealing if you have Cinaras in your trees.

Any insecticide should give good control of Cinara aphids, but you should consider using a material that does not have a long residual, as workers will be handling the trees and consumers are often concerned about pesticide residues. Talstar is a product many growers have used with success.

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**Recommendations for the use of agricultural chemicals** are included in this publication as a convenience to the reader. The use of brand names and any mention or listing of commercial products or services in this publication does not imply endorsement by North Carolina Cooperative Extension nor discrimination against similar products or services not mentioned. Individuals who use agricultural chemicals are responsible for ensuring that the intended use complies with current regulations and conforms to the product label. Be sure to obtain current information about usage regulations and examine a current product label before applying any chemical. For assistance, contact your county Cooperative Extension agent.

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