Tree Grades

Because of wide variation in species grown for Christmas trees in the US there are no widely accepted tree grading standards that apply to all trees. There are existing and published USDA standards, but they are hopelessly out of date and largely irrelevant.

The commonly used commercial grades for Christmas trees:

- Premium Grade
  - #1 Grade
  - #2 Grade
  - Utility Grade

Of the four, #1 and #2 grades are commonly sold at most commercial farms, which rarely separate out premium_grade trees. Utility grade trees have lost most of their market niche due to the high operating costs faced by retailers.

The problem with using these grade labels is that the underlying standards are not agreed upon within the industry, so tree grading varies from vendor to vendor in substantial ways. Even in Oregon, which is the leading state in the nation for Christmas tree production (over 25% of all the trees grown in the US), a single widely grown species like Noble Fir has wide differences in its grade standards from one vendor to the next. So if there is not general agreement among growers, then what good are tree grades? This variation in product quality represents one of the biggest uncertainties for tree buyers, and in an industry dominated by small independent players there are many shady operators misrepresenting and selling substandard quality goods.

I've worked in the Oregon Christmas tree fields for over 35 years with many different farmers whom operate at widely different levels, from small amateur hobby farms to one of the largest scale production Christmas tree farms in the world. I've witnessed the product demands of the public firsthand throughout that entire period and have seen some consensus emerge between professionals and consumers. At the moment, #1 and #2

grades generally refer to plantation grown trees that have been shaped by shearing and culturing.

Some of the basic elements of tree grade are:

- Density - This refers to the density of the foliage and branches, or how bushy the tree is. Higher density, especially around the upper portion of the tree is one of the primary preferred grading characteristics. Full healthy foliage that obscures the trunk and extends all the way out to the taper line of the tree uniformly from top to bottom and on all sides is considered the highest grade.

- Taper of the Tree - The width of the tree as a percentage of its height. A taper of 50% or less would be narrow—60% is considered average—over 70% would be considered a wide tree— anything over 80% would be very wide.

- Holes and Openings – Large openings between branches or spots where a major limb is missing and the trunk is revealed are considered downgrades in quality. A #1 grade tree can have minor holes and openings on several sites but no major limbs should be missing. #2 grade trees are likely to have at least one hole, opening or missing limb.

- Tops – The top, or leader, of the Christmas tree is …

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