Maybe It's Time to Spruce Up

By Bob Girardin

Background

Over the many years of growing Christmas trees, including exotic conifers, I met a few growers of true firs that felt that growing spruce as a Christmas tree was not a good choice. They told me that this sentiment was prevalent among fir growers in general; with the main reason given being that spruces will not hold their needles very well as a Christmas tree.

Having successfully grown spruce myself, and knowing others who have done so, I have decided to try to change some minds on growing spruce as a Christmas tree – in particular the genus *Picea* meyeri (Meyer spruce), which is native to China.

The Facts

I have been growing *Picea* meyeri (Blue Meyer) for 18 years and have received feedback from all over the United States and Canada. This is what we know:

- Beautiful blunt blue foliage
- Unsurpassed needle retention (See Test Results Below)
- Very little shearing needed

- Makes a great ornamental
- Perfect for a pot in pot growing system
- Transplants easily
- Fibrous root system
- Hardy to -50F
- Does well on heavy soils
- Drought tolerant
- Does not break bud early
- Upright branching habit that will support heavy ornaments
- One of the top sellers at my farm in Sanbornton, NH
- Responds well to fertilization
- Responds well to basal pruning which will promote top growth
- Rate of growth depends on soil quality and ample rainfall
- It has been successfully grown in Zones 2-7 and has been grown in Zones 8-9 with special care as choosing heavy soils and supplying ample watering
- Known to be resistant to spider mites and aphids and there has been no reports of needle cast diseases
- It has survived serious droughts when Blue spruce failed
- Has taken top prizes in the spruce category at some state contests

Negative Feedback

The main reason that many growers were unhappy with Meyer spruce was the plants they ordered as Meyer spruce turned out to be Wilson spruce of Dragon spruce. In both cases these species were slow growing with light green needles and broke bud early. In China these three

species grow side by side and the seed size is about the same, which makes it difficult to identify. In the nursery, the nurseryman must have a keen eye to make the correct identification in a plug form.

Bill Sayward of Itasca Greenhouse in Cohasset, MN was one of the first nurseries to grow Meyer spruce. I obtain my first plugs from Bill in 1993. Bill can identify Meyer spruce as a plug when it is mixed in Wilson spruce or Dragon spruce. This is not to say that Itasca Greenhouse is the only plant nursery with this capability, but it is critical that you are getting Meyer spruce when you make your order.

Conclusion

I know of no other conifer that has the attributes that Meyer spruce possesses. Everything about this tree will benefit you as a Christmas tree grower, and your customers will love it. All I ask is that you give it a try.

Meyer Spruce Needle Retention Test Results

Background

For over six years I have been telling growers about the excellent needle retention of Meyer spruce as a fresh cut Christmas tree based on my own personal experiences and the feedback from my own choose-and-cut customers. In 2006 I decided to do a scientific needle retention test for Meyer spruce. I chose to compare the needle retention to that of the Fraser fir, which has proven to have excellent needle retention. The trees were well hydrated and had gone through ample periods of below freezing temperatures.

Procedure #1

On November 30th, I cut one branch from three excellent specimens of Meyer spruce and Fraser fir.

I brought them into the house, made sure they were dry, and placed them on a plastic table cloth in a room with low humidity and a fairly constant temperature of 65 degrees F.

Results

Three weeks later I took each branch and shook it and rubbed my hand up and down each branch and observed the needle drop on a white sheet. Both Meyer spruce and Fraser fir had very little needle drop.

Four weeks later I followed the same procedure (Remember these branches have never been in water) and again there was little needle drop with both species, the Fraser fir branches had that dull very dry appearance.

Procedure #2

Next I chose one branch from the seven week trial of each species and recut them and placed them in water.

Results

After being in water for four weeks, the foliage on the Fraser fir remained dry, but held its needles. The Meyer spruce broke bud, began to grow, and did not drop a needle.

Conclusions

These amazing results did not surprise me. This is one tough tree and it would also make an excellent wholesale Christmas tree because it retains its moisture for a very long period of time.