The Corkbark Fir Seed Orchard at Sandpoint, ID

By Tom Leege

Corkbark fir, also known as blue alpine fir, is a subspecies of subalpine fir (Abies lasiocarpa), a species that grows primarily at higher elevations in the mountains of the western United States and Canada. The corkbark fir is separated as a subspecies (arizonica) because of its bluish needle color and occurrence only in the mountains of Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado. Both corkbark and subalpine fir are commonly used in landscapes and as Christmas trees.

A study was initiated by Dr. Dan Barney at the University of Idaho in 1998 to evaluate 16 different seed sources for these two firs to determine which ones were best suited to growing conditions in northern Idaho. All six sources of corkbark fir seed and 10 sources of subalpine fir seed came from national forests in the southwestern states. All seeds were grown at the University of Idaho Forest Research Nursery in plastic foam block containers for 2 years. They were then transplanted for one year at the University of Idaho Sandpoint Station. In the Spring of 2001, the most vigorous seedlings from each seed source, 360 corkbark and 600 subalpine fir, were planted in randomized plots of 20 trees each, at the Sandpoint Station with 60 trees for each seed source. The study objectives were to compare the seed sources for growth, vigor, shape, disease resistance and other desired attributes for nursery stock and Christmas trees.

This study was completed in 2010 and the University of Idaho was contemplating the future of these 960 trees in the study. In 2013, members of the Inland Empire Christmas Tree Assn.(IECTA) suggested that the 30 best corkbark fir trees be identified and marked as a future seed orchard. The University accepted this idea with the provision that IECTA be responsible for identifying potential orchard trees and disposing of the remaining trees. From mid-2014 until mid-2016, IECTA members salvaged appropriate trees for their own tree lots at Christmas time and cut and piled many of the remaining trees. In late June, 2016, IECTA hired a contractor to use his Raptor 300 mulching machine to flatten and mulch all the remaining unwanted trees and brush into the ground, not only in the seed orchard but an adjacent area to the South where other conifers were growing and not wanted. This operation successfully leveled the area and prepared the ground for seeding . The IECTA purchased an appropriate grass seed mixture and provided it to the Sandpoint cycle club whose members sowed and irrigated the seed during the summer of 2016. IECTA installed a sign on the site explaining the origin and importance of the seed orchard and each of the 30 seed trees is identified with a sign.

Two of the seed trees had a few cones this past year, but it is not likely that we will have a significant cone crop worthy of collecting for several more years. Since these 30 seed trees are beautifully shaped and appear to be superior Christmas trees with very little shearing, it is likely that their offspring will be well worth waiting for.

This corkbark fir seed orchard is near the grand fir seed orchard that was established by IECTA and the University of Idaho in 1982. Three cone collections have been made from this orchard, the latest being in 2016. Seedlings from this orchard have not disappointed the growers that have planted them, and confirm the value of using seed from a proven seed source. Some seed from the 2016 collection is available for sale. For more information, please contact Tom Leege, tcleege@gmail.com or phone 208-664-3725.