

# Innovative Growers Sent Christmas Trees A Flying

by Jim Heater, Silver Mountain Nursery, Sublimity, Oregon

This coming harvest season marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the biggest innovations in the harvest of Christmas trees since the chain saw. In the fall of 1976, Silver Mountain Christmas Trees, located in the Cascade Foothills east of Salem, and Noble Mountain Tree Farm, located in the hills Northwest of Salem, began using helicopters to harvest Christmas trees.

In both cases the hilly, rough terrain offered at least a portion of the incentive for trying a different harvest method. Of course, there were other incentives as well, one being the efficient use of land. Christmas tree fields were traditionally set up with harvest rows about every 200-300 feet. This represented about a five percent loss in plantable acreage.

The most important consideration was the additional expense of maintaining and rocking those roads on steep hillsides along with the tremendous amount of additional equipment needed in the form of tractors, trailers and four-wheel drive equipment to bring the trees in out of the field. Also included is the additional labor necessary to shag the trees to the roadways and load them on to trailers to be taken to the sorting yard.

Besides the high costs for hand labor, there were additional considerations, including much less compaction of the surface soil layer and the increased speed of harvest. The most commonly used aircraft for Christmas tree harvest are the Bell Jet Ranger, Hughes 500 and Hiller Soloy, which under average conditions can each lift out approximately 4,000-5,000 trees a day.

During that first year, the two pioneering helicopter companies were Jerry Harschenko, owner of Industrial



A helicopter gently releases a bundle of Christmas trees into a truck in the Cascade Foothills.

Aviation based in Brooks, Oregon, who flew for Silver Mountain, and Ross Zeller based in Corvallis, Oregon, who flew for Noble Mountain Tree Farm. Most of the early shigs that flew were Hiller 12E and many of them were Soloy turbine conversions. During

the first couple of years there was a real evolution in slings. We started out with two one-half-inch poly ropes that are similar to what we use today, but had two or three 2 x 4s that served as spreaders between the two ropes. Later the 2 x 4s were discarded and we simply

use two 30-35-foot long ropes to sling the trees.

I recall that during that first couple of years there was a whole lot of laughing and joking about the helicopter harvest. Some thought it was entirely impractical and others believed that it was a fad that would be short lived. However, best estimates are that in today's fast moving harvest and large shipping volumes that about 75-80 percent of the trees harvested in the Northwest use helicopters.

In the beginning only a few helicopter companies ventured into the tree lifting business. As the need for more helicopters grew, they came in from states as far away as Ohio and Alaska and a lot of them from Idaho, California and other adjacent areas.

Silver Mountain had been contemplating helicopter harvest from the beginning and never did put in any harvest roads in their fields. About mid-summer of 1976, my dad, Maurice, and I headed over to Evergreen Aviation to talk with them about helicopter lifting. On our way, we stopped at Noble Mountain and as we talked with Paul Goodmonson, who was the managing partner at that time, he said, "Get into my pickup and let's look at some trees!" We did and

noticed that his fields were quite large and had no roads in them either. My dad said, "Paul, how are you planning on getting these trees out of the field? You don't have any harvest roads." Paul was quiet for a minute and then said, "If you promise not to laugh, I'll tell ya. I am bringing them out with a helicopter." My dad did laugh and said, "We aren't laughing at you, but with you! We are on our way to Evergreen to see about helicopter lifting for this year also."

As it turned out, the helicopters that Evergreen used primarily for this type of work, though they lifted big loads, were quite slow. We needed the speed and agility of smaller ships carrying somewhere between 800-900 pounds, maybe even up to 1,000 at a turn. Now it was a funny coincidence that our two companies were thinking along those lines, but had never collaborated with each other on the final process.

One thing we have noted about helicopter pilots is that they seem to be somewhat nomadic. They fly for one company for several years and then they fly for another company and so forth. Over the years, we have tried to stay with the helicopter pilot no matter what company they work for and what ship he

is flying. This is because when you find a good pilot, he is worth a great deal. When a good pilot can get the proper rhythm to pick up and deposit bundles of trees smoothly without breaking limbs and tops and shave seconds off of each turn, that pilot is worth hanging on to. The longer they are with you, the better they fit in to your harvesting program. They know your fields, the other equipment they will be working with that moves trees to the yard and they work as a team very efficiently. I believe any good pilot can deposit trees on the landing in a pile. You really test the mettle of the pilot when he is lowering bundles into a truck bed that is 8½ feet by 32 feet.

Visibility for the pilot, in order to make it easier for him to deposit a load safely, was the reason for painting our beds yellow. Yellow worked best because it stood out so well amongst the green trees and it was easy for them to gauge the opening they were trying to hit. The first beds we built for use under the helicopters had steel frames but plywood sides and bottom. That didn't last very long. We started to build them out of steel and most of those beds built back in 1979 are still in use today. ▲

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