

Balsam Bough Harvesting: Doing It Right for the Future

Minnesota is a leader in the holiday wreath and greens industry. This is a credit not only to the balsam fir resource, but more importantly, to those who are supplying the boughs and products through hard work and commitment to quality. It has taken generations of effort to build this industry that employs thousands of people in Minnesota. For Minnesota to continue to be a leader, however, the balsam fir resource and how it is managed must be looked at carefully. Proper management of the balsam resource will enable the industry to continue to grow and be a source of income this year, next year, and in future years.

The information provided here is for people who harvest balsam boughs in Minnesota. Bough harvesting provides a supplementary income for many families. Using proper harvesting techniques will guarantee a long-term sustained yield of boughs for everyone.

Characteristics of Balsam Fir

Balsam fir is a short-lived, cold-climate tree of the northern Lake States. It requires abundant soil moisture and a humid atmosphere. In wetlands it grows in pure stands or in association with black spruce, cedar, and tamarack. On higher ground it is typically found in the understory of pine, aspen, and birch stands. While mature balsam fir is used primarily for pulp and saw timber, the young trees are used for Christmas trees. The flat, dense, dark green needles are well suited for wreaths and holiday decorations.

Most balsam boughs are harvested from early October to early December. Boughs retain their needles the best if harvested after the second hard frost.

Harvesting the Right Way



When this bough (photo left) is used to make a wreath, only the small branches above the red tape will be used. The rest of the bough below the red tape will be discarded. In most cases the wreath maker would be willing to pay more for the better boughs. Proper cutting will allow the remaining branch to grow into a harvestable bough again in five or six years.

Proper Harvesting Actions:



- Leave branches on the upper half of the tree for future growth.
- Harvested branches should have ends no larger in diameter than a pencil.

Branches were removed only from the lower half of this tree (photo left) leaving the top half of the tree to grow and provide boughs for the future.

Harvesting the Wrong Way



These trees (photo far left) were cut down and the boughs removed. Wildlife habitat, future bough cutting, and the timber resource are gone forever.

Harvesting the entire branch (photo left) stops any future growth of that branch.

Improper Harvesting Actions

- Chopping down trees
- Harvesting from trees less than 5 feet in height
- Cutting more than half the height of the tree or higher than you can reach
- Stripping all the branches from the tree
- Cutting branches back to the trunk

Bough Sizes



The right size is 18 inches to 30 inches in length

Bough buyers will pay more for shorter boughs because there is less waste of time and resource when manufacturing into wreaths.

Doing It Right

Get a permit, written consent, or bill of sale!

Permits are required for harvesting balsam boughs from public lands in Minnesota. Permits can be obtained from Chippewa and Superior National Forest offices, tribal headquarters on reservation lands, DNR Forestry offices, and county land management offices.

State law requires a permit, written consent, or bill of sale to be carried whenever cutting, removing, or transporting boughs whether the land is publicly or privately owned.



Law Change

A new law, designed to help guide sustainable harvest of boughs went into effect on July 1, 2002. The new law requires individuals who purchase more than 100 pounds of boughs or decorative materials to purchase a "bough buyer's permit" and record:

- seller's name and address
- form of written consent
- government permit number, legal description, or property tax identification number of the land from which the boughs were obtained