



The Minnesota Approach to Non-timber Forest Product Marketing: The Balsam Bough Industry and Other Examples

John Krantz¹

THE WREATH INDUSTRY IN MINNESOTA

Minnesota is a leading state in the production of holiday wreaths. It is estimated that the companies producing wreaths in Minnesota have total sales exceeding \$20 million and growing. Wreaths are sold in all states in the U.S., mainly by non-profit groups for fund-raising.

The boughs harvested from the balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*) are used in 98 percent of the wreaths manufactured. Balsam fir grows throughout the forested region of Minnesota and the northern portions of Wisconsin and Michigan. Balsam fir also grows throughout Canada including most of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

The balsam bough harvesting season begins in Minnesota in late September or early October after two or more hard frosts have “set” the needles on the branches. Then, until early December, the boughs are made into decorative wreaths for homes throughout the U.S.

In 1996, Minnesota formed the “Balsam Bough Partnership,” comprised of public landowners, such as state, USDA Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and selected counties. In addition, the group includes most of the large wreath companies, bough buyers, and bough “pickers.” This unusual group of public/private partners meets twice yearly to review seasonal needs and review compliance on legislation and permits, and it sponsors workshops and publications to ensure that boughs are harvested and transported within established guidelines.

Permits to harvest boughs are available from all public land management agencies. Permits vary in price. Reservation members obtain “free” permits and can harvest boughs on public lands within reservation boundaries. Bough pickers are required to post a “windshield” poster when harvesting.

The Balsam Bough Partnership published “how to” material for beginning pickers. As an example, boughs up to 36 inches in length are acceptable and fit the guidelines of sustainability. Harvesting guidelines call for clipping the ends of the branches, leaving shorter branchlets on the stem. A 5- to 6-year rotation is recommended.

Bough buyers are an integral part of the wreathmaking industry. The larger wreath companies within Minnesota, as well as several outstate companies, contract with bough buyers to handle the purchases for them. A good day’s picking by a bough picker can yield up to 1,000 pounds. In 1999, bough buyers paid 14¢ to 17¢ per pound (\$US) for the 12- to 36-inch boughs. The pickers usually bundle boughs in 25- to 35-pound bales—a weight that is reasonable to handle by pickers, buyers, truckers, and wreathmakers.

Several of the larger wreath companies manufacture wreaths, swags, and garlands at larger facilities throughout Minnesota. Wreathmaking begins in the summer when cones, collected from ponderosa pine in Idaho, Montana, and Washington, are shipped to Minnesota by the van load. It is not unusual for the bigger companies to use 8 to 10 million cones per year. The cones are painted using a tumbler system. The cones and vinyl coated berries and ribbons are all prepared in the summer so they are ready for decorating the wreaths during the busy October and November season.

Once, all wreaths were made by hand, but now most are made using a wreath machine that

¹ Supervisor, Utilization and Marketing, Forestry Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 500 Lafayette Road, St. Paul, Minnesota 55115-4044, USA; Phone: 651-296-6491; e-mail: john.krantz@dnr.state.mn.us.

bends a wire hoop over the boughs. These machines, which have been in use for 10 to 12 years, have allowed the industry to expand rapidly.

Many wreaths are manufactured in homes by families living throughout northern Minnesota. The wreath companies contract with these families to produce a basic wreath; these wreaths are then brought to the manufacturing center where the cones, berries, and ribbons are added before shipping. As a home business, families can gross up to \$20,000 (\$US) for the season.

A number of small companies or families manufacture and sell wreaths and greens through their own marketing channels. Some specialize in fully decorated wreaths, some in large wreaths for specialty applications, and some in greenery as in decorated crosses and grave blankets.

HOW CAN FOLKS FROM CANADA CONTRIBUTE?

The wreath industry in Minnesota is limited by:

- production capacity
- labor
- availability of boughs

The larger wreath companies appear to have developed a larger market than they can supply. Therefore, Canadian folks are welcome to participate by:

- becoming bough buyers
- picking boughs
- as families, manufacturing basic wreaths in their homes

If anyone is interested in participating in the bough and wreath business, some Minnesota contacts are:

1. Evergreen Industries
Joe Ahern
4921 Babcock Trail
Inver Grove Heights, MN 55007
Phone: (651) 457-4441
Fax: (651) 457-0676
2. Mickman Brothers, Inc.
John and Chris Mickman
14630 Highway 65
Anoka, MN 55304
Phone: (763) 434-4047
Fax: (763) 434-4611

3. Nelson Nursery, Inc.
Mike Lemke
25834 Main Street
Zimmerman, MN 55398
Phone: (763) 856-2441
Fax: (763) 856-2440

A dozen other companies in Minnesota would also be willing to consider a partnership with Canadian folks. Contact names are available from our DNR-Forestry office (see footnote 1).

OTHER NON-TRADITIONAL FOREST PRODUCTS

Birch Bark, Stems, and Twigs

The bark from standing dead trees is removed by first felling the tree, then scoring the entire length of the tree with a chainsaw, and then sectioning it into chunks. The bark from the dead tree can be peeled off fairly easily. Once off, the inside bark is scraped with a paint knife to remove any wood attached and then pressed flat. Markets include decorative flower pots, mosaics, furniture enhancements, decorative bird houses, and a multitude of other products.

Live bark is stripped by slicing vertically on a live tree. In early summer (around July 1), the bark will peel back virtually by itself and large sheets of bark can be removed. It is essential not to slice too deeply into the tree and damage the inner bark. Many products are made from live birch bark including containers of all types, novelty items, and other items.

The tops of birch can be used as decorative trees. Tops about 2-1/2 inches in diameter and 7 feet in length are shipped to companies that add plastic leaves and artificial branches and then pot the birch top as a look-alike tree for business and hotel lobbies. As many as five to seven tops can be harvested for decorative trees from one larger stem.

Birch twigs are often gathered and sold as material for hardwood wreaths. When green, the twigs bend easily and form a wreath that can be decorated for any occasion. Twigs from alder, red-osier dogwood, and tamarack are also gathered and manufactured into decorative wreaths.



Burls

Burls from spruce, birch, and black ash are highly sought after as a source of raw material for the home craft person. Sliced properly, the burl wood forms a highly decorative wood piece for many products including clocks, mirrors, knife handles, and turnings.

Artist Conks

These are shelf fungi that grow from dying or partially dead trees. After proper drying, they can be used by artists for wood burning, painting, or carving. These conks are best removed from the tree in the winter to prevent smudging, scars, or hand marks. Conks are sold by size; a clean 12- to 16-inch conk could be worth \$15 to \$20.

Cottonwood Bark

The thick bark found in western Canada has value as a raw material for carvers. Thick bark comes from large trees and the tree must be dead for the bark to be removed successfully. Bark 3 to 5 inches thick is desirable. A pickup load of this type of bark would be worth \$300 to \$400 (\$US) on the wholesale market.

Walking Sticks and Decorative Wood

“Diamond” willow is found throughout central Canada and Alaska and the northern U.S. It is a unique tree used for furniture, lamps, walking sticks, and many other products. The diamonds form when a fungus attacks the branch stubs and a callus forms as the willow continues to grow around the wound. Decorative diamond willow products are most easily sold as finished products. However, there is a market for green unfinished pieces for folks who choose to finish the wood themselves.

Other walking stick woods desired by carvers include aspen, alder, birch, balsam, and cedar. The bark can be easily stripped from these woods when the sap is readily flowing in late May and June. Oftentimes the debarked stick is sold in the raw form to hobbyists who want to finish the stick themselves.

MARKETING THE NON-TRADITIONAL FOREST PRODUCT

There are many, many ways to locate markets for non-traditional products from the woods. Selling through consignment shops, roadside stands in tourist areas, flea markets, and craft shows, as well as advertising on the Internet, are but a few ways to market NTFPs.

The best way is to display your product at special interest group gatherings, such as this conference. Most people need to actually “see” the product before they decide to purchase it. The key is to present a quality product. Quality means more than price. Once you have established a quality product, you will always have a demand for your product.