

Addressing Consumer Concerns about Pesticides on Christmas Trees

Many retailers have probably already encountered this issue. A customer walks on the lot and asks where are the trees “with no chemicals.” They are likely the same people who pay three times the price for bananas labeled “organic.” And that’s OK...organic farming is just as legitimate as any other method and consumers choose with their wallets.

This becomes a problem though when consumers, and sometimes the news media, begin to create and perpetuate an “Urban Myth” that Christmas Trees grown on a farm which uses chemicals for fertilization or pest and weed control are harmful to people or pets if touched or even brought into the home...that trees grown organic style with no chemicals are “safer” than other trees. Take for example, this email sent to the National Christmas Tree Association office early in the sales season 2005:

-----Original Message-----

From: Taryn

Sent: Wednesday, November 30, 2005 11:43 AM

To: info@realchristmastrees.org

Subject: organic trees

How do I find a tree farm or seller in my area that does not use harmful chemicals on their trees. I know I can ask before purchasing, but chances are whomever I am buying a tree from will not know for sure what is used on the trees, or will not be honest if they do know that chemicals are used. Are there certified organic tree farms/sellers?

Thank you for your help in making our holidays greener.

As a retailer of Real Christmas Trees, you may be asked about this topic, and when that happens, we do have a positive story to tell. You are an important link in the chain of truth needed to quell this particular Urban Myth before it becomes too big to control and hurts our industry.

Remember the Alar scare in 1989 and what it did to the apple industry? Mass hysteria ensued after media reports that Alar on apples could cause cancer. At a parent's request, state troopers chased a school bus to confiscate a student's apple. School administrators had apples and apple products summarily destroyed. Apple markets rotted overnight.

By the time the truth came out that the study cited by the media was found to be faulty by the scientific community and the amounts of active ingredient in Alar that had caused cancer in mice were 133,000 to 266,000 times the highest estimate for a preschooler's daily intake of Alar treated apples, the damage had been done.

Following are a few talking points that you may wish to use either directly with customers when they ask about chemicals on trees or in brochures and web sites.

- There have been scientific studies measuring Christmas Trees harvested and sent to markets for any chemical residue and harmful levels have ever been found.
- Christmas Tree farmers do not use chemicals in a "harmful" manner. Chemicals are used only when needed and only according to the specified instructions and regulations of the EPA, the USDA, and the FDA.
- Of materials used, a common one is Roundup, an herbicide used by many homeowners and typically at a fraction of the labeled rate to stunt rather than kill weeds. Insecticides are used only when necessary based on scouting.
- Most of the products used by Christmas Tree farmers are also labeled for food crops and for use in the home and garden.
- Most pesticides used are ground applied, never touching the tree itself. While some pesticides are applied to the tree, they are typically applied in the spring when pests attack trees, not in late November when the trees are harvested.
- Christmas Tree farmers live on their land and raise their families there. They would not engage in an activity that would put their families or the people they sell their product to in harms way.

For more information Christmas tree production, pesticides, and the environmental impacts of Christmas trees, see:

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/fletcher/programs/xmas/environment/index.html>