

# Non-Timber Forest Products and Implications for Forest Managers



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## Balsam Bough and Wreath Industry in Minnesota

by John Mickman, Mickman Brothers

The holiday wreath industry in Minnesota is large—"large" to the tune of \$20 million in sales annually! Mickman Brothers is a factor in that equation as the second-largest wreath maker in the entire nation.

My brother Chris and I contend that "there's a balsam bough resource out there, and there are creative ways to use boughs before they are ground into pulp." The Mickman family has been involved in the wreath business for many years. The company began in 1975 with a focus on landscaping. The "wreath business" actually began, however, with my grandmother who made wreaths to "sell around town." When Chris and I purchased the wreath business from our father in 1979, the company was making 15,000 wreaths that were delivered "around town."

Last year  
Mickman  
Brothers used  
2,000 tons of  
balsam boughs

and employed 500 people who are directly involved in the actual making of the wreaths. That figure does not include the hundreds of bough gatherers who provide the natural resource of the company's holiday creations.

The wreath industry can be a successful one for a number of reasons: balsam grow well in northern Minnesota; there is a large economic impact from the industry; there is little impact on the resource when harvested correctly.



**Assembling large wreath.**  
(photo courtesy of John Krantz, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources)

## What's the Law?

State law requires a permit, written consent, or a bill of sale to be carried whenever cutting, removing, or transporting boughs whether land is publicly or privately owned. Permits are required for harvesting balsam boughs from public lands in Minnesota. Permits can be obtained from forestry offices located in the Chippewa and Superior National Forests, tribal headquarters on reservation land, Department of

Natural Resources-Forestry, and county land management offices.

Permits are \$25 per family with no tonnage limit. The Leech Lake Reservation Division of Natural Resources offers free permits to tribal members. Purchasers of permits are given a brightly colored dashboard poster to be placed in a vehicle window when bough collection is taking place. Bough buyers are responsible for ensuring that the people they buy from have a permit in possession.

## How's It Done?

Balsam fir bough prices are dependent on many factors, including weather. Wetter conditions in the summer encourage growth of fir trees, but cold and damp conditions in the fall can slow harvest. The cutter's skill is an important factor in bough prices. A well-cut bough will bring in more money than boughs that are cut improperly. Taking the time to cut boughs correctly not only brings the harvester more money, but makes life easier for the bough buyers and wreath makers and, importantly, extends the life of the tree.

Key points in balsam bough harvesting include:

- Harvest boughs from the bottom half of the tree. The wreath industry prefers the flat or semi-round boughs that are typically found at the bottom of balsam trees. The round, rough-looking boughs of the upper part of older trees are not suitable for use in the wreath industry.
- When harvesting branches from the bottom of the tree, leave a portion of each pruned branch for regeneration. This will ensure balsam boughs for the future.
- When harvesting from smaller trees, leave at least 50 percent of the balsam tree's limbs intact in the upper portions of the tree.
- Harvested branches should have ends no larger in diameter than a pencil. As you harvest along the branch, leave part of the branch for growth and regeneration.
- Harvest boughs from trees that are greater than 7 feet high.
- Choose trees to trim that stand beyond 50 feet of public roads so that the aesthetic value of balsam trees can still be enjoyed by passersby.

## Ensuring a Future

While a healthy and sustainable balsam bough resource is the responsibility of all citizens, the Balsam Bough Partnership provides an opportunity to unite in a focused and mutual concern for the balsam bough resource on public and private lands. Members represent the U.S. Forest Service, Minnesota DNR, county land management offices, Leech Lake Reservation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and



**Bough Permit**  
**Minnesota DNR - Forestry**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Permit Number   | Permittee |
| <b>PERMIT EXPIRES:</b> _____  |           |
| Permission to harvest boughs on the following described State lands _____ |           |
| Forest Officer  | Date      |
| Signature of Permittee  | Date      |

*Post This Permit In Your Vehicle Window When Harvesting Boughs.*

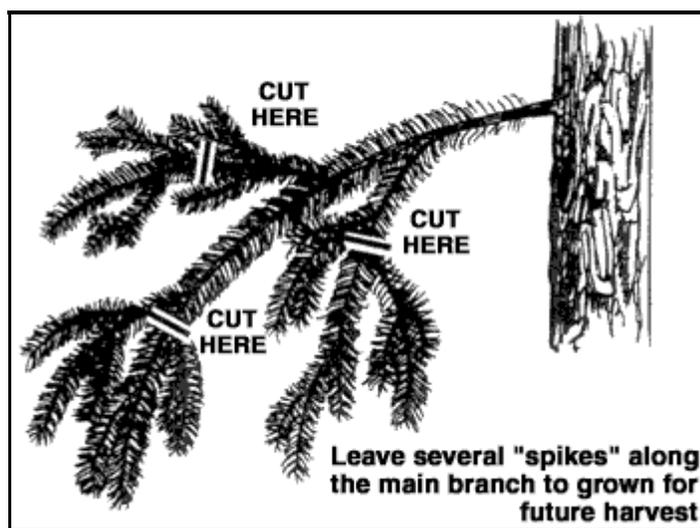
members of the wreath industry, bough cutters, and bough buyers. The partnership conducts bough workshops in the fall to familiarize cutters and all involved in the balsam industry how to sustainably harvest the resource.

### Proper harvesting of boughs.

(photos courtesy of John Krantz, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources)

The bough industry is also encouraging the forest industry to commit to sustainable bough harvest and utilization. Currently, Mickman Brothers is working with Blandin Paper Company and Hibbing Taconite Company to develop a relationship in which forested parcels to be harvested by the paper company are first opened for access to bough pickers. The pickers can go into a site before the timber harvesters arrive and cut balsam boughs from trees that are to be harvested for pulp or other wood products.

This kind of relationship provides the opportunity for resource managers and resource users to create one more product with a particular forest stand and piece of land. Through these types of cooperative partnerships, we can take full advantage of this wonderful resource before all the boughs are lost during timber harvest processes.



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