

I collect native seeds for my nursery. I've found that I need to be flexible, innovative, and fair when reaching agreements with private landowners concerning access to their property for seed scouting and collecting. Fostering these relationships is good business.

## KEY WORDS

contract, seed harvest, ethics, private landowners

## NOMENCLATURE

USDA NRCS (2004)

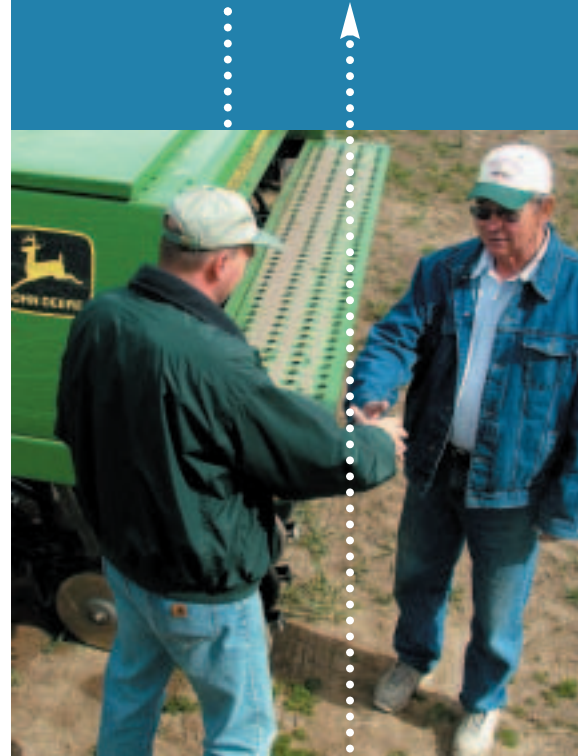
**I**n North America, populations of native plant species have become fragmented from development of human civilization over the last 200 y. Because of this fragmentation, many native species are difficult to find or have been extirpated from areas. And, because fences have been erected, it can be especially difficult to gain access to hunt for species in new locations. Dogs with large flashing teeth, blind guys in coveralls with shotguns, and even drug dealers protecting their crops can complicate gaining access to a new site. When permission to a site is finally granted, reciprocation with property owners is of the utmost importance.

I have a particular fondness for searching for “needles in hay stacks” and an addiction to crossing log jams in fast flowing water, traversing unstable substrates, and clamoring up rock walls in search of species to propagate at our nursery. Anyone who finds exploration for plants exciting should also find property owner relations exhilarating. In my experience, it's important to tell stories, to “chew the fat” with farmers, to teach and attempt to extend environmental enlightenment, to instill a sense of urgency and the potential magnitude of the native mission, and to protect and save native species from strip malls and housing developments. I've found that many property owners appreciate stories of challenging situations, dog chases, gooey mud, bee and mosquito attacks, and encounters with wildlife. Sharing my triumphant success stories of discovering rare, threatened, or endangered species with property owners still gives me goose pimples. Most people are excited to hear about the implications of rarer species being found, put into nursery propagation, and eventually reintroduced to many restoration sites. There will be a few who think the government will take their land away if rare species are found and will deny access as a result. Move on to the next property owner.

I have found that walking up to a property owner covered in “weed seeds,” such as *Bidens* L. (Asteraceae) and *Desmodium* Desv. (Fabaceae), is a unique and helpful way to explain the types of plants that I'm interested in collecting. I promptly convey an explanation of the “weed's” benefit and the reason that species is needed in native restoration projects. Otherwise, property owners are quick to accuse you of being “one of those dopers.” Still, at this point, I've had

Photo by Deborah Page-Dumroese

## Collecting Seeds on Private Property



## The Importance of Reciprocal Agreements

| Bob Allison |

farmers shake their head insisting that I'm insane, and that, of course, anybody with such little wit can knock themselves out collecting them "damn weed seeds" as often as they like. The type of property owner who insists these kinds of seeds are weed seeds generally isn't interested in any sort of reciprocal. But the proper thing to do is to find ways of reciprocating even when it isn't required. After all, we weed-seed collectors are "superstitious, ya know." I have reciprocated by introducing purple loose stripe beetles into a horribly infested site (with owner permission). One property owner expected me to bring Levi Garret chewing tobacco and blueberry or raspberry pies when I came to cruise and collect. Another owner just wanted me to sit several hours and visit, and another wanted me to bring my kids and dog on the weekends to visit.

Based on the reason for requesting access to this site, such as a particular species and its concentrated density on the site, I may have a little economic reciprocation available (that is, payment for seeds). Whether monetary payment is made or not, I always provide a botanical inventory that contains interesting information about the plants, scientific and common names, photographs, and reports of wildlife seen on the site. Although nobody wants to give time and money away, fair is fair, so my extending this service to the owner is good business and will likely extend the arrangement for years. People who are interested in economic gain from native seeds often benefit from specific examples of what their property might be worth should they grant seed collection (for example, payments made to other owners). Paying a property owner several hundred to a couple thousand dollars can open up many opportunities. It's a solid business deal. Because some species may require 3 to 5 y or more before an appreciable yield is achieved in a seed production nursery, wild collections are worth every penny of a reciprocal payment.

I tell landowners with large, monotypic stands of plants (seeding, flowering, and the potential to do so) that my nursery needs, that with correct timing of the seed collection the potential yield could be several hundred dollars or more. I arrange specific dates to visit their property. I explain to the owner that proper pollination, seed maturation, and final viable seed collected are what inevitably determines the value of any seedlot harvested, and that the reciprocal amount paid to them is proportional. Of course, mapping locations of sought-after plants, detection of exotic invasive problematic species, and overall inventory of species present can normally be extrapolated into some form of potential financial projection.

Starting with my botanical inventory and site assessment, I can generally project a dollar value and from that amount estimate the dollar or barter value the property owner may receive. When agreement is reached and seeds are harvested, payment should be prompt and never delayed. I've bartered with property owners who prefer receiving seasonal plants, making sure they understand that plants will be available when the timing and conditions are favorable for outplanting. I've promised labor for installing plants, drilling seeds, and even applying chemicals to unwanted weeds within the property boundaries. Remain flexible and open-minded when dealing with property owners, because just as every site has different variables and complexities, property owners can be many times more challenging to keep happy.

When making any wild collection, limit the total percentage of seeds collected. Only experience, careful observation, and data collection determine the proper percentage to be collected at any one location. The gospel in wildland seed collection is to minimize foot traffic or any potential damage to the site, and to stop collecting if it appears the native plant population is declining or that populations of exotics are increasing.

The ultimate goal in any native seed collection is to make additional native seeds available to the restoration industry, to locate new species, to carefully discover germination and propagation protocols that can be repeated, and to produce seedlings to be placed into a seed amplification production setting. Good stewardship of the ground, responsible collection of native seeds, and innovative and fair reciprocation with property owners must be valued to maintain the true drive, spirituality, and essence behind the native plant movement.

## REFERENCE

[USDA NRCS] USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. 2004. The PLANTS database, version 3.5. URL: <http://plants.usda.gov> (accessed 22 Jan 2005). Baton Rouge (LA): National Plant Data Center.

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