

# Purchasing native seeds— advice from a nurseryman

| Bob Allison

## ABSTRACT

Many factors influence the prices and availabilities of native seeds. Communicating effectively with vendors ensures that you receive the product you want when you need it.

## KEY WORDS

supply and demand, restoration,  
commercial harvest

**T**he use of native species presents many clear advantages over imported plant species, but it also can be difficult in many ways. Proper timing and depth of seed installation, appropriate species for site conditions, and most important, seeds that are viable and true to species, are all necessary considerations. Fortunately, an increasing number of vendors are producing a diverse list of available native species, but “not all vendors are created equal”—be careful selecting vendors and checking pure live seed results before purchasing. Restoration sites can’t always be babied during establishment periods, so



reduce and remove as many variables as possible to maximize your success.

When I began working with JFNew in the restoration industry 10 y ago, it was typical for seeds purchased from vendors to be in huge bags containing sticks, leaves, mouse parts, and native and nonnative seeds. Those days are gone, thank goodness, with the “stuff-n-fluff” of years past becoming high-quality native seeds that are a more valuable commodity. Purchased seeds now are normally very pure, de-hulled, de-fluffed of the pappus, and identified with precise information. The price reflects this needed quality control and considerably more seeds are now produced as a result of the increased demand for large restoration projects.

Pricing of native seeds can be very volatile, depending on market supplies that can be influenced quickly by a single, large project that consumes the inventory within some distance from the restoration site. Price volatility is driven further by specified installation timelines that don't consider production requirements, which creates varying degrees of desperation for seed stock. Price is set by supply and demand. The more difficult the plant is to grow or collect or clean seeds from, the higher the price. This can force contractors to clamor for available seeds and push supply prices even higher.

To effectively and efficiently purchase native seeds it is important to know what products are available; what the general product high-, medium-, and low-pricing thresholds are; and which vendors are reliable. A reliable vendor will respond to your request in a prompt and professional manner. They should provide materials that are pure live seed (PLS) tested, be willing to provide official seed testing results when requested, and deliver high-quality materials when promised. Some dealers provide the service of procuring all the species needed.

Standardizing your quote request information, and formatting this information for the ease of vendors, will facilitate receiving clear, useful quotes and will increase your success at making comparisons and choices on native seed materials. Conduct a vendor analysis yearly if you are expecting multiple projects that require native seeds. Be prepared to purchase materials from multiple vendors depending on the quantities, quality, and pricing of the material needed and don't neglect to demand official PLS test results, precise ship dates, and origin of material. Noxious, exotic, and weed percentages, seed germination, dormancy, and hardness percentages should be reviewed prior to purchasing any materials. Make this seed test information available to ecological staff for review prior to installation on any restoration site.

I find it inadequate to e-mail, fax, or mail to vendors a simple spreadsheet with columns for genus, species, quantity needed, price per pound, and PLS percentage. Although a number of different vendors can be quickly located and contacted using that method, it is best to take a few minutes to make a telephone call to form rapport with a sales representative. This will help the process move along most efficiently and successfully, minimizing miscommunication.

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