

The Role of Government Nurseries

"The best government is that which governs least"

—John O'Sullivan

"Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil"

—Thomas Paine

Americans have always had a healthy suspicion of government, and that's one of the things that makes our country unique. Lately, however, I've been disturbed by a growing anti-government philosophy which has culminated in the terrorist bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. This radical anti-government sentiment also has hit closer to home. Last year, the Detroit Ranger Station of the USDA Forest Service was burned to the ground and other buildings and vehicles vandalized here in Oregon. We can all condemn such extremist measures but the fact is that many, if not most, Americans just do not trust their government.

One of the spinoffs of this anti-government sentiment is the privatization movement which believes that many, if not all, services of federal and state governments should be turned over to private industry. Their basic premise is that private industry can do anything cheaper and more efficiently. I don't agree. I think that there is a place for government in our lives and that federal and state nurseries have a role. The problem is: defining that role in our changing society.

A Proud History

Before we try to figure out where we are going, it's often helpful to look at where we have been. In the US, the first forest and conservation nurseries were established by the federal government almost 100 years ago. The USDA Forest Service started the Bessey nursery in 1902 to provide seedlings for the afforestation of the

Nebraska Sand Hills (**Figure 20**). Out on the West Coast, the Wind River Nursery was started in Washington in 1906 and the Savenac Nursery in Montana in 1909 with the primary objective of growing seedlings to reforest after large wildfires and protect watersheds. The federal work programs of the 1930's, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Shelterbelt Project, created the need for more government nurseries. In 1939, the output of Forest Service nurseries was over 136 million trees. As these programs were disbanded, many of these federal nurseries were turned over to the states with the mission of providing quality, low-cost seedlings for forest and conservation projects on state and private land.



Figure 20. Government nurseries have a long history of developing new cultural procedures and equipment (like this "high-tech" undercutting bar at Bessey Nursery) and then sharing this information through technical publications.

Table 7. Cultural techniques and equipment developed in government nurseries have provided the bulk of the technical information used in forest and conservation nursery manuals in the United States.

<u>Title</u>	<u>Publication Date</u>	<u>Publisher</u>
Seedling and Planting in the Practice of Forestry	1916	John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
Reforestation on the National Forests	1917	USDA Forest Service
Planting the Southern Pines	1954	USDA Forest Service
Forest Nursery Practice in the Lake States	1957	USDA Forest Service
Conifer Nursery Practice in the Prairie—Plains	1965	USDA Forest Service
Woody Plant Seed Manual	1948	USDA Forest Service
Seeds of Woody Plants in the United States	1974	USDA Forest Service
Hardwood Nursery Guide	1976	USDA Forest Service
Forest Nursery Manual: Production of Bareroot Seedlings	1984	Oregon State University/ USDA Forest Service
Southern Pine Nursery Handbook	1985	USDA Forest Service
Container Tree Nursery Manual	1989 to 1998	USDA Forest Service

Government nurseries also have a legacy of generating technical information about the propagation of forest and conservation plants, and sharing that knowledge through demonstrations, workshops and publications. In fact, the first US nursery manuals were federal government publications. The classic book *Seedling and Planting in the Practice of Forestry* was written by J. W. Toumey of Yale University School of Forestry in 1916. If you check the references and citations, you will find that almost all of the scientific knowledge used to write this book was developed by the US Forest Service or State forestry organizations. Another classic is *Reforestation on the National Forests* which was published as a USDA Bulletin No. 475 in 1917 and shares the accumulated experience from the early federal nurseries. This was followed by a series of USDA Agriculture Handbooks from across the country (Table 7). The classic *Woody Plant Seed Manual* (1948) has been republished as *Seeds of Woody Plants in the United States*. A team of Forest Service scientists are currently updating this invaluable reference and it should be ready next year. Since I don't have access to

my own nursery, state nurseries are a primary source of propagation information for the Container Tree Nursery Manual series.

It's easy to see that government has a strong tradition in the forest and conservation nursery business, but what are some of the roles of government nurseries today?

Provide inexpensive seedlings to encourage conservation plantings — Small, private landowners have a need for high quality, source-identified, locally-adapted seedlings and state forest nurseries are supplying this need as well as providing technical assistance after the sale.

* Most states forestry organizations have tree improvement programs and so customers receive seedlings of the highest genetic quality.

* Government specialists provide professional advice to customers on matching the species and seed source to their land, and then follow-through with site preparation services and outplanting advice.

Government nurseries have state-of-the-art storage facilities and a delivery network to assure that seedlings reach customers in top quality.

* Problem solving is provided in the case of poor performance. Government nurseries will guarantee their stock and provide free replacement if the problem is determined to be their fault.

A typical sale to a private landowner is small (as few as 25 seedlings) and most states will make up custom orders of many different species. There is no large profit margin in these sales and so most private nurseries are not interested in such small orders. State forestry organizations also offer a variety of technical services to small, private landowners which would be cost-prohibitive for most private nurseries.

Develop and share information — As discussed earlier, the government has always served as a source of information on how to propagate and plant forest and conservation seedlings. State and federal nurseries always are willing to share what they know. In fact, most consider technology transfer to be one of their primary missions. Many private growers got started with a visit to a government nursery, and others can see the latest technology during demonstration tours and workshops.

The continuing need for these services is becoming apparent with the recent interest in native plant propagation. New information is needed on how to collect seeds or cuttings, treat them to overcome complex dormancy requirements, and raise them in nurseries. Understandably, private nurseries have no incentive to share their propagation secrets and so I feel that the government must step in to provide this service. Sharing this technical knowledge actually helps stimulate competition in the private nursery sector by allowing new growers to get started (see the propagation protocol example in Propagating Native Plants section in this issue).

Working Together

The controversy about privatizing government nurseries has been going on for some time (**Figure 21**). It was the subject of a group discussion at the Intermountain Forest Nursery Association meeting in 1987. The groups discovered that the situation varies considerably across the nation and concluded that the issue needed to be resolved by promoting better cooperation and communication on a regional basis. Unfortunately, the negotiation process can take time and sometimes get politically complicated. For example, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is working together with representatives of the Wisconsin Nursery Associa-

tion and other interested parties to develop an agreement on the future role of their state nurseries. Based on these discussions, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was developed, but the Wisconsin Department of Justice ruled that it potentially violated the Sherman Anti-Trust Act since it mentioned production quotas. Everyone is hopeful that the MOU can be modified so that everyone can support it. Similar negotiations have prevented conflict in other states which just proves that any obstacle can be overcome if everyone agrees to work together.

I realize that much of my justification for government nurseries is historical in nature, and I'm willing to admit that things are changing. However, I still think that federal and state government nurseries have a role to play in the management of our natural resources. I hope that this editorial will stimulate the dialogue to determine just what that role should be.

Sources:

- Landis, T.D. 1987. Government vs. private nurseries: the competition issue. IN: Landis, T.D. tech. coord. Proceedings, Intermountain Forest Nursery Association. August 10-14, 1987: Oklahoma City, OK. Gen. Tech. Rep. RM-151. Ft. Collins. CO: USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station: 126-129.
- Marty, T. 1997. Personal communication. Madison, WI: State of Wisconsin. Dept. of Natural Resources.
- Tourney, J.W. 1916. Seed and planting in the practice of forestry. New York: John Wiley and Sons. 455 p.



Figure 21. This political cartoon from the Sacramento Bee newspaper on April 4, 1941 shows that the government-private nursery competition issue is nothing new.