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Making it a

habitat

A DESIRE TO HELP
NATIVE SALMON RUNS SPURS
GREATER INVESTMENT IN
RESTORATION PROJECTS

By Elizabeth Petersen

The quality of Oregon's natural habitats – its watersheds, in particular – makes a difference in the health of native fish runs.

Concern about these habitats kicked into higher gear a decade ago, when the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) listed three anadromous species – steelhead, coho and Chinook salmon – as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The declaration triggered the flow of millions of dollars in grant funding into the Northwest for fish habitat restoration projects.

Consequently, the demand for native plants to use in these projects has increased dramatically, according



Restoration projects can be small, or they can be large and ambitious, such as the 135-acre effort at Graham Oaks Natural Area near Wilsonville, Ore. (left). There, the Metro regional government's greenspaces program planted some 150,000 trees and shrubs, along with many native grasses and wildflowers, in an effort to re-create an oak savanna that was present before it was converted into farmland. Other projects target smaller areas, such as this streambank (above).

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to Mark Mouser, principal of RiverFix NW, a Wilsonville, Ore.-based firm that specializes in stream bank restoration projects.

“As long as we have threatened and endangered species in the Northwest,” he said, “there will be a high demand for nursery grown native species.”

Several local and regional efforts to protect and restore natural sites are driving the demand for native plants ever higher:

- The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) works with diverse partnerships of agencies and businesses to restore wetland habitats.

- The Network of Oregon Watershed Councils promotes “strong, resilient watershed councils throughout Oregon sustaining healthy land, water and economies.”

- The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) funds efforts to “help create and maintain healthy watersheds and natural habitats that support thriving communities and strong economies.”

- The Department of State Lands requires the use of native riparian trees, shrubs, plants and grasses in restoring stream bank riparian zones.

- In Portland, the Bureau of Environmental Services partners with the Office of Transportation in Green Streets projects that use bioswales filled with appropriate native plants and trees to divert and deal with stormwater runoff on site.

According to Mouser, tens of thousands of Northwest native plants have been used in restoration efforts over the past decade, and the demand is not likely to decrease anytime soon.

“The end is not in sight in our lifetime,” he said.

Finding the right combinations

RiverFix NW attempts to create native plant combinations that shade streams and provide places for fish to hide as well as provide species to support bird and wildlife use.

A typical streambank restoration project for RiverFix NW could include 500 to 1,000 one-gallon trees placed at the tops of banks where their quick growth and sturdy root systems stabilize the slope.

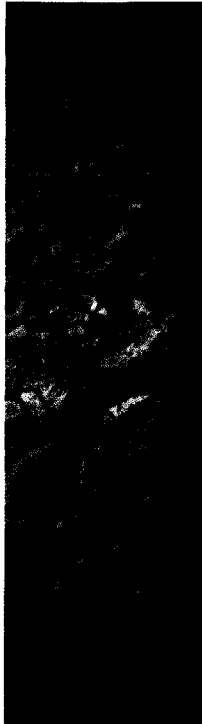
Black cottonwood (*Populus trichocarpa*) is a favorite, but Oregon ash (*Fraxinus latifolia*) and western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) are also chosen frequently.

Native shrubs, selected according to site specifics, include Sitka and Pacific willow, Nootka rose, red Osier dogwood and Oregon grape.

Shrubs are planted on sloping banks on one-foot centers, where fast growth, robust root systems and good hardiness also anchor the soil.

The typical project finishes with plugs of native sedges and grasses and

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seeds mixed in a tackifier and sprayed on to stabilize the slopes and promote germination and growth.

Mike Ridling, co-owner of Sevenoaks Native Nursery in Albany, Ore., noted that part of the dramatic increase in the demand for native plants comes from county and state mitigation requirements.

Builders have to remedy damage caused by construction, especially near streams.

This is true in every state, so Oregon nurseries have the opportunity to provide plant material appropriate for other native ecosystems too.

Sevenoaks Native Nursery specializes in native trees and shrubs, including quaking aspen trees, which are not native to western Oregon.

Ridling does not advise planting aspen in sites west of the Cascade

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— RiverFix NW

Mountains, where they are not native, but recommends them as ideal for areas east of the Cascades, including Colorado, where many Sevenoaks Native Nursery aspens go for restoration and landscape uses.

Meeting the demand

Brooks Tree Farm, a wholesale nursery in Salem, Ore., grows plants for reforestation efforts.

It also supplies stock that contractors use for direct installations, and offers liners for other nurseries to grow on for resale.

“We have supplied conifers for commercial reforestation for 28 years,” owner Kathy LeCompte said. “The native plant line has grown substantially in the last ten years.”

Government agencies with contracts for plants from Brooks Tree Farm



Sunshine Creek in Clackamas County, Ore. formerly ran along the side of the road, in a ditch, but the county Department of Transportation and Development rerouted it and created a meandering stream in a nearby field. Children from nearby Damascus School then helped replant the area with native grasses, slough sedges, Nootka rose, Pacific ninebark, salmonberry, Pacific willow, cedar and Douglas fir. The work will prevent erosion and provide shade to keep the stream cool for fish.

include the City of Portland, Clean Water Services of Hillsboro, Metro, and agencies in the Puget Sound area of Washington state.

The market for restoration and reforestation projects is not always predictable and steady, however.

"We consider it highly speculative and risky," LeCompte said. "Users tend to be very specific in their requests and it's impossible to know which items might be on a bid sheet."

Since native plants tend to be very aggressive, growing without a contract "can leave a grower with plants that are quickly oversized and useless," she added.

Champoeg Nursery, Inc., of Aurora, Ore., grows a wide variety of bare root and containerized herbaceous perennial, wetland and woody plants native

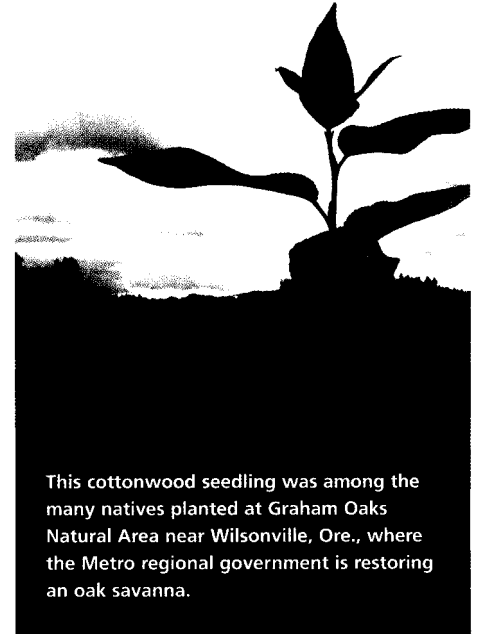
to the Pacific Northwest and areas farther inland.

According to owner Paul Stormo, the nursery strives to be "stewards of the environment by helping to sustain the health of naturally functioning landscapes and the productive capacity of the environment."

All of the plants grown by Champoeg Nursery are "site-identified and indexed according to the ecoregion classification system," Stormo added.

Under that system, each ecoregion is defined as an area with similar geologic, vegetative, climatic and other environmental characteristics.

Demand for native plants comes mostly from new projects, Stormo said. He works with his customers on "small



This cottonwood seedling was among the many natives planted at Graham Oaks Natural Area near Wilsonville, Ore., where the Metro regional government is restoring an oak savanna.

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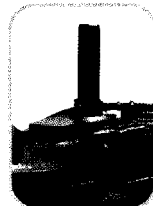
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“Exceptional care is taken to ensure that the health of our donor sites is preserved and the genetic and ecological integrity of our plants is not compromised.”

Paul Stormo
— Champoeg Nursery



Paul Stormo, owner of Champoeg Nursery, helps government and business clients solve environmental problems through careful selection of native plants to meet the specific needs and conditions of the site.

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acreage management,” where native plants help solve specific problems such as mitigating points of erosion, controlling invasive plant populations and improving riparian areas.

Stormo considers such planning to be part of his service to customers, but he also refers clients to local and regional public agencies, including soil and water conservation districts that offer free planning services and cost share programs for landowners.

“The demand has been consistent,” Stormo said. But he added, “We are seeing fewer bid sheets and lower demand this summer than in the past.”

He is unsure whether the slow-down is due to the overall lull in the economy or to other reasons.

The market for Oregon natives grown by Champoeg Nursery is primarily close to home, but Stormo also sells native plants that perform well as ornamentals for gardeners in other parts of the country.

Sourcing seeds and cuttings

Champoeg Nursery propagates stock from seeds, cuttings and divi-

sions that are "selectively gathered from donor sites at or near our nursery," Stormo said, "as well as other natural areas in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana and California.

"All of our collection sites support a healthy, natural and diverse native plant community," Stormo said. "At the time of collection, exceptional care is taken to ensure that the health of our donor sites is preserved and the genetic and ecological integrity of our plants is not compromised."

To increase plant diversity and improve the genetic makeup of native plants, Sevenoaks Native Nursery collects seed from a variety of sites in the Western states.

"Cutting-grown material is not necessarily the best direction for restoration projects," Ridling said.

Instead, "seed from specific sources produces more genetically adaptable plants," he said.

This approach addresses the concern that plants native to one part of the state or country may have genetic adaptations that make them less useful for other environmental conditions.

For example, a bigleaf maple that is native to the Willamette Valley has different adaptations from a big-leaf maple that is native to southern Oregon, Ridling said.

One will not be as successful as the other in a given location, he said. The more specific a plant's adaptations to the conditions at a particular site, the better the chances are that the plant will thrive.

"A strong restoration plan might include plants grown from seed collected as close to the restoration site as possible," Ridling said.

"On-site cuttings can preserve, but do not improve, the overall health of a restoration site," he said. ©

Elizabeth Petersen writes for gardeners and garden businesses, coaches students and writers, and tends a one-acre garden in West Linn, Ore. She can be reached at gardenwrite@comcast.net.



Streambank restoration projects such as this one benefit salmon by reducing erosion and, eventually, providing more shade to keep the water cooler, which is healthier for the fish.



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