

The Trees Unlimited Program: An Experiment in Establishing Seedling Plantings¹

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Abstract.--Trees Unlimited is a pilot project formed in 1985 to provide an integrated, year-round program of planting design, seedling planting, and maintenance to rural landowners in northern Colorado. It is a nonprofit program which sells seedling survival products and total tree care services associated with the establishment of conservation plantings.

INTRODUCTION

Trees Unlimited was formed in 1985 through funding by an association of four soil conservation districts in the northern front range area of Colorado and the State Soil Conservation Board. The intent was to provide not only promotion and sales of seedling trees in the area but also to provide to the rural landowner a source of planning and design assistance, site preparation, planting, and other tree care services associated with the establishment of seedling conservation plantings.

The program operation is similar to that of a small business. Although it is nonprofit, it must generate its own operating budget. Therefore, there is a fee charged for services besides the price of goods and materials sold.

ORGANIZATION

Trees Unlimited is overseen by a board consisting of a member from each of the four soil conservation districts involved. There is a program manager who reports the progress periodically to the board but operates the program mostly autonomously.

Cooperating with the program are the local field offices of the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) and the USDA Soil Conservation Service (SCS). These offices actively refer interested parties to Trees Unlimited. These same district offices also help support the program through lending field assistance, office and storage space, and seedling storage facilities during the spring.

The original targeted market for sales of seedling conservation plantings was the large number of agricultural producers in the area. However, due to various factors, the majority of plantings sold during the last two years has been to owners of small rural acreages. Because the area is situated near several population centers, there is an abundance of the "hobby farms" in the 1,500 square miles that Trees Unlimited serves.

PLANTING SERVICES

Trees Unlimited tries to make available a wide variety of products and services for its customers. Various combinations of materials and services are needed in each different situation, and assistance is given to the landowner to decide which practices and plants are appropriate or needed. In these seedling plantings, the plant material is typically a small percentage component of the total program cost. Overall, labor costs are the largest portion, followed usually by cost of drip irrigation materials. Some representative prices of services are shown in table 1.

The program manager will perform an initial site visit and landowner consultation, design a planting and/or irrigation plan, offer several site preparation and weed control methods, and detail all of these prices in an itemized bid. Based on the landowner's budget and the need/desire for a planting, he or she will decide on the size of planting and level of service to be implemented.

Upon signing the contract agreement and receipt of the initial payment (depending upon the season), work can begin immediately. Actual installation of tree shades can be seen in figure 1.

The types of conservation plantings Trees Unlimited has implemented include field and farmstead windbreaks, wildlife habitats, Christmas tree plantations, and fruit orchards. The designs conform to SCS and/or CSFS specifications.

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Table 1.--Average prices charged to planting customers based on a planting of 200 to 300 trees and shrubs.

Services and products	Price charged per tree
Site visit	0
Planting and/or irrigation design (total)	75.00
Site preparation--Simazine application	1.10
Site preparation--Rototilling	.80
Plow & disk (CSFS rented equipment)	1.80
Planting" (manual or by machine)	1.25
Fertilizer tablet, installed	.25
Plastic rabbit guard, installed	.80
Wooden tree shades, installed	.80
Drip irrigation system, installation	1.00
Drip irrigation system, materials	2.20
Wood chip mulch, installed	1.10
Polypropylene mulch, installed	3.90
Herbicide application, Roundup	.50
Insecticide spray	.40

¹These prices are the base amount for work within a 20-mile radius of Ft. Collins or Longmont, Colorado. For each 10 miles beyond the radius, the base price is increased 20%. These priced are for services to seedling plants.

²This is an estimate based on actual amounts of materials used on past plantings; used here for preliminary estimate.



Figure 1.--Installation of wooden tree shades on a 3-row windbreak near Boulder, Colorado.

Another important form of conservation in Colorado is water conservation. On a tree planting great amounts of water (plus time, water costs, and pumping costs) can be saved through employing a drip irrigation system. Trees

Unlimited stocks a full line of materials for sale and installation. This accounts for a large percentage of material sales annually.

Providing these services on most of the plantings has yielded survival rates, on an average, of greater than 95% into the second year. An example of a high level of service, i.e., combining several products to contribute to seedling survival, can be seen in figure 2.



Figure 2.--Close up of a pinyon pine seedling, showing plastic rodent guard, tree shade, drip irrigation pipe, and wood chip mulch.

PROGRAM PROMOTION

Trees Unlimited has a small advertising budget and relies in large part on the cooperating agencies' active referrals for business. The program also utilizes press releases and news announcements through the local radio stations and newspapers. Booths at country fairs shared with soil districts have helped for exposure. The soil districts and agency district offices also keep Trees Unlimited's brochures to hand out. Mass mailing to targeted areas, telephone contacts, and site visits make up most of the winter duties.

INVOLVEMENT WITH NURSERIES

Trees Unlimited contracted for planting almost 8,000 seedling trees in 1987, both bareroot and containerized. The bulk of these were purchased from the CSFS Nursery in Ft. Collins,

Colorado. Most seedlings sold by this nursery are either picked up by the customer on specific days or shipped out during a short time period each spring. With a schedule such as this, it might be inconvenient, if not impossible, for a program such as Trees Unlimited to interact with a nursery if the nursery policy were inflexible. Due to the nature of Trees Unlimited's business, planting time is extended, usually filling all of April and May. The trees must be stored during that period, yet be available to the planter every day. A workable arrangement has been made for storage and pickup, both from the nursery and from a CSFS district office 50 miles away, which provides similar storage facilities.

Other seedling survival products and chemicals are often purchased through a few of the local commercial nurseries.

Occasionally, larger planting stock is desired by the customers, and that is available everywhere. For the most part, the seedling-size planting material has the best combination of

hardiness, vigor, size, ease of planting, and affordability.

THE FUTURE

As all of the people involved with Trees Unlimited agree, this is a program which is valuable and necessary in this area. It fills an important niche, providing the link between the seedling producer and consumer. It is a new program and will continue to depend on all of the involved parties to promote it. It is not a well-known name yet, and most potential customers do not know such a program exists. For that reason, it is felt that if this type of "total tree care" program were to be initiated in any certain area, it had best be allied in some way to an existing, known channel or outlet of seedlings. Publicity is usually the limiting factor to growth of a worthwhile business, and the cooperation and support of the area agencies are essential to the success and growth of such an experimental program.