

PRIVATE SECTOR NURSERIES IN MICHIGAN

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Good afternoon, my name is Jerry Peterson. I'm owner of Badger Evergreen Nursery in Allegan, Michigan. For those of you who might not be familiar with our state, Allegan is located in southwest Michigan between Holland and Kalamazoo. I've been asked to come and speak on behalf of the private nursery industry in Michigan. Before I get started with my presentation I'll tell you a little about my own operation and how I got into the seedling growing **business**.

I graduated in 1975 from Purdue University with a B.S. degree in Wildlife Management. At that time job opportunities were almost nonexistent in my field but I'd worked part time while in school for a local nursery and enjoyed the work so thought I'd find a nursery to work for until I decided what to do with my life. Thru an acquaintance of my future wife at the time I landed a summer job with Armintrout's Nursery in Allegan. That summer job lasted nine years.

In 1984 I was approached by Badger Evergreen Farms from Merrill, **Wisconsin**. They were in the process of expanding their Christmas tree operation into Michigan and were interested in starting a seedling nursery in conjunction with their operations. A partnership was formed and the first seedling crop was planted that spring.

My nursery currently produces two million, five hundred thousand conifer seedlings and transplants annually. I grow fourteen species of spruce, pine, and fir and market them as (2-0), (3-0), (1-2), (2-1), (2-2), and (2-3). My major market is the Christmas tree industry but also sell to Soil Conservation Districts and other reforestation interest. Most of my stock, about eighty-five per cent goes to the states of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, with the balance going to Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri.

There are three main points to cover in my presentation:

1. The history of private nurseries in Michigan_
2. The current status and future of private nurseries in Michigan.
3. The Michigan Seedling Growers Association.

It is impossible to talk about private nurseries without also talking about the Christmas tree industry. Private nurseries have always closely followed the Christmas tree industry's cyclic pattern. The beginning of the planting of plantation Christmas trees after World War II also marked the beginning of private seedling nurseries in Michigan, some of which are still in existence. In the 1950's along with private nurseries, the state, several SCD nurseries, Michigan State University was also operating three nurseries and selling to the public.

According to Cliff Gearhart of Wolverine in his recent book "For The Love Of Trees", millions of Scotch pine were_ field planted all in the fifties. In one year alone in the late fifties, Michigan nurseries were offering more than one hundred million seedlings for sale. They had so many that some nursery beds were plowed under because the market was saturated.

Edgar C. Kidd was Cheboygan County's extension director for many years before and during the Scotch pine explosion. In 1964 he gave Mr. Gearhart a report on the Christmas tree industry. In it he said that most of the three hundred fifty thousand acres currently in production of Christmas trees had been established since World War II. The peak of the planting had occurred in 1957 when thirty thousand acres were planted to Christmas trees, mostly Scotch pine.

It was estimated in that year alone fifty-six million Scotch pine were planted in Michigan. Mostly on a 3 X 3 spacing with the idea to harvest many as table top trees. During this time the original Seedling Grower's Association came into existence. It had **one** hundred fifty five members all private growers. Many were small growers producing maybe one hundred thousand trees in a garden type nursery.

The reasons the business of planting Christmas trees became so popular in the mid fifties are many:

1. Government farm programs encouraged reforestation practices through ASC cost share offerings.
2. Soil. Bank land use choices, Soil Conservation District interest and encouragement and advice of extension workers.
3. Land was relatively cheap and readily available.
4. Nurseries, both private and tax supported were making trees cheaply available.
5. New planting machines were developed to facilitate operations.
6. Markets for plantation Christmas trees were good.

However planting quickly out stripped demand and by 1964 the first Scotch pine boom was over. With the sudden lack of demand for planting stock many nurseries, both public and private, went out of business. In 1958 Michigan State University agreed to stop production of forest tree seedlings for commercial use by 1960. The University did maintain a relatively small forest tree nursery for teaching and research purposes which is still in operation. In the early 1960's the original Seedling Grower's Association decided to join forces with the Michigan Association of Nurseryman.

From the mid 60's to the mid 70's there were probably no more than ten private nurseries producing coniferous planting stock in Michigan. When I began in 1975 things were pretty much the way they had been for years. Techniques for growing and planting seedlings had not changed much. However, at that time the demand for seedlings once again started to increase and the private nurseries **began to** produce more stock.

This increased demand for planting stock also provided an opportunity for new nurseries to begin operation. Many of these new nurseries, such as my own, actually were started from the nurseries in existence at that time. For instance, Badger and Fairplains Nursery were started by people once employed by Armintrout's. Wahmhoff Nursery was recently started with the assistance of Norbert Noecker who operated his own nursery for many years. Two other nurseries, New Life and Bosch's Countryview were started by people who had worked for private nurseries in Holland as teenagers and Armintrout's while in college. And so it was by the early 1980's when the current Seedling Growers Association was formed that we have twenty five to thirty private nurseries operating in Michigan.

The decade of the 1980's was an excellent one for Michigan nurseries. Virtually everyone producing stock was selling out. It was estimated that fifteen to sixteen million seedlings were planted by Michigan Christmas tree growers annually prior to 1987. During this same period five million five hundred thousand to five million seven hundred thousand were being harvested annually. Once again we were heading into a glut situation. Since that time annual planting has decreased. According to Melvin Koelling of Michigan State University in a recently published ten year survey of Michigan Christmas tree growers, planting in 1991 was approximately eleven per cent less than in 1990. Plantings in 1990 were thirty-two per cent less than in 1989. It is interesting to note that since 1988 annual plantings have been less than annual harvest numbers_

This lack of demand has **once** again led to an over supply situation for the private nurseries in Michigan. My own nursery first noticed a decrease in sales in 1991 and a further decrease this past spring. About twenty per cent of my production was put to the plow due to lack of sales much like the situation some thirty years ago. Private nurseries across the state that I have spoken with tell of similar conditions.

What does the future hold? The lack of demand for planting stock by the Christmas tree industry has many private nurseries looking to expand to other markets. Opportunities for reforestation and wildlife plantings, along with the current environmental awareness of the public, point to tremendous potential for these markets.

The private nursery industry of Michigan is alive and well. We are blessed with ideal growing conditions thanks to the moderating affects of Lake Michigan. Most of the nurseries are located along the western side of **the** state where abundant snowfall keeps frost at a minimum in the beds which allows us to begin lifting operations as soon as the snow melts in early March. Cold storage allows us to ship to markets virtually nationwide.

Thanks to strong research by Michigan State University and such people as the late Doctor James Hanover, Michigan's private nurseries are leaders in tree improvement thru proper

seed source selection, stringent grading of plants, and proper packing to ensure vigor and survival in the field. Currently Michigan's private nurseries produce between sixty to seventy million seedlings annually. Competition is the force that keeps Michigan's private nurseries always striving to grow a better plant. When I started in this business seventeen years ago we produced (2--0) spruce in the three to six inch size and Scotch pine as (2-0) in the four to eight inch size. Today nurseries produce (2-0) spruce as six to twelve inches and the pines routinely as (2 0) eight to fourteen inches. Seventeen years ago the culls and undersize seedlings were often **selected** for transplanting. Now only the best seedlings are selected for the transplant beds. New and better transplant machines have been **developed to** handle these larger seedlings and produce even better transplant stock. Improvements in the herbicides available, along with a better understanding of disease problems and cures have all played a role in the advancement of seedling production.

However, I feel the most important reason for the advancement of seedling production is communication. Without communication and the willingness of nursery people to share techniques that not only have helped but also hindered their own operations, all the research and advances in seed sources, disease control, weed control, fertilization, and everything else involved in forest tree seedling production would be for nothing. This is why the formation of the Michigan Seedling Growers Association has in my opinion been so vital to the seedling production industry in Michigan.

The purposes of our Association as stated in our constitution and by laws are:

1. To establish communications among all the growers of coniferous, reforestation, and conservation seedling stock ~~in the~~ state: private, public, and industrial
2. To exchange information on all phases of seedling growing including seed sources, genetic improvement, experimental trials, methods of growing and harvesting, and everything relating to producing better quality stock.
3. To encourage close cooperation and professionalism among growers and other associations.
4. To create a unified voice for the seedling tree industry.
5. To promote research in the seedling tree industry.

Obviously, when you get people from diverse backgrounds and viewpoints such as the private, public, and industrial nursery managers we have in our association your not always going to agree on how to best accomplish certain goals. But, that doesn't mean we can't sit at the same table to discuss and learn from one another in a spirit of cooperation. Communication is the key element if private, public, and industrial nurseries are to co--exist and work together to best serve the total reforestation effort. In Michigan the Seedling Grower's Association is the vehicle through which

the lines of communication are kept open.

Thank you for inviting me to be here and speak on behalf of the private seedling nurseries in Michigan. I hope you all enjoy the conference.

REFERENCES

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