

## **THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC NURSERIES IN MICHIGAN**

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Michigan's first State-run nursery was established at Higgins Lake in the north central Lower Peninsula in 1903. This was in response to the condition of the State's former forest land, it having been ravaged by fires after heavy logging. The pine forests that had been expected to last 500 years were gone in less than 50 and Northern Michigan's economy was collapsing.

The State Legislature established the first Forest Reserves from tax-reverted lands in the same year. Trees from the Higgins Lake Nursery went to reforest the State lands. Permission was given to the Michigan Forestry Commission to "cut, remove, or sell any trees, timber, or other forest products" from these lands.

In 1909 the Legislature transferred the powers of the Forestry Commission to the Public Domain Commission. The Public Domain Commission decided on March 10, 1910, that surplus nursery stock should be "offered to the people of the State of Michigan for planting in the State of Michigan at cost plus price of delivery to nearest railroad station."

In 1921 the powers of the Public Domain Commission were transferred to the Department of Conservation. The duties of the new Department included "...to promote the reforestation of forest lands belonging to the State..."

During the 1930s millions more acres reverted to State ownership. Those lands deemed suitable for agriculture were resold; the others were retained for addition to the forest reserves. The lands formed the nucleus of the nation's largest State forest system at 3.8 million acres.

In 1935 legislation provided for the sale of timber from State lands. 'The director of Conservation is hereby authorized to dispose of timber from any of the State lands under the control of the department of conservation under such rules and regulations as may be prescribed by the conservation commission.'

Also in 1935 the Hardwood Nursery was established near Wolverine, Michigan to provide planting stock to fill the needs of the Game Division.

An Act was passed in 1945 providing for the use of revenues from timber sales from State land for reforestation and forest protection.

In 1950 the Wyman Nursery was leased from the U.S. Forest Service and a new tree planting initiative was soon begun under Governor G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams.

In 1957 a fourth nursery, the Southern Michigan Nursery, was opened near Brighton, Michigan to "take care of Soil Bank needs."

In the early 1960s the State's authority to sell seedlings was questioned. A legal opinion rendered by the Michigan Attorney General in 1962 Stated that the Department does have statutory authority to sell seedlings.

When this writer became employed by the Department, in 1965, the policy said that the major purpose for the State nurseries was to provide planting stock to private landowners and surpluses could be planted on State land. This represented a reversal of the 1910 role in which the State produced trees for its own lands and could sell its surplus. When and why this reversal took place, I don't know.

By the middle 1960s most of the open land on the State Forests had been planted and need for nursery stock for State land had diminished. The Higgins Lake Nursery; the flagship of Michigan's reforestation efforts for over 60 years, was closed in 1965. The Hardwood Nursery also was closed. Following this, State reforestation declined to a low of only 200 thousand trees in 1974.

In 1977 the State Forests began to request more planting stock than the surplus policy allowed them. To resolve this internal conflict, the Forest Management Division began to talk about increasing production.

At this point, let's go back to 1957 to look at what else was happening. As mentioned earlier, the State opened its Southern Michigan Nursery that year to provide planting stock for Soil Bank needs.

Another outgrowth of the Soil Bank program was the proliferation of Christmas tree plantings. Cultural practices were worked out for Scotch pine and a demand for planting stock was created. This demand led to development of a large number of private nurseries. (See Jerry Peterson's remarks for details.)

For the next 20 years the State continued to supply red and jack pines, white spruce and a few hardwood and shrub species for forest plantings and the private sector produced mostly Christmas tree species--Scotch pine, blue spruce, Douglas-fir, etc.

When, in 1977, we began to talk of increasing State production the private sector began to cry "foul." Before we moved further, a study committee was appointed to clarify the State's role in seedling production and to set a direction for the program.

The committee's recommendation was that the Department of Natural Resources should produce seedlings for its own use only and discontinue sales to the public. High quality stock was being produced by the private sector and they had both the desire and capability to expand production to compensate for what was being produced by the DNR.

In response to the committee report, the Southern Michigan Nursery was closed in 1984 and converted to a tree improvement center. We now have irrigated seed orchards there for several species.

We are now back to the policy of producing stock for the State lands. We have had a couple of instances when we have had surpluses. In those cases we sold the stock to commercial nurseries in bulk quantities at a bed-run price.

The results of the change included a greatly improved relationship between the State and the private growers and the formation of the Michigan Seedling Growers Association. Within the DNR, we're better able to concentrate on our own program now and our reforestation program is greatly improved.

The foregoing has covered only the State nursery operation. There are public nurseries in two other categories in Michigan. The USDA Forest Service operates the J. W. Tourney Nursery at Watersmeet, Michigan. Their function is to provide seedlings for reforestation on the National Forests. Two Michigan Soil Conservation Districts operate nurseries which provide stock for sale to other SCDs in Michigan and to landowners within their own District.

That is the essence of the respective roles of the publicly operated nurseries in Michigan. there have been changes since this conference was last held in Michigan. There are occasional questions regarding roles of public nurseries, but we are better equipped to handle these questions since we've formed the Seedling Growers Association. An added benefit of the changes made has been for many the acquisition of new friends.