

# Developing Native Plant Nurseries in Emerging Market Areas

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**Abstract:** The importance of developing a market for quality native plant materials in a region prior to the establishment of a nursery is crucial to ensure its success. Certain tactics can be applied to help develop a demand for native plant materials in a region. Using these tactics will help create a new market for native plant materials.

**Keywords:** Native plants, native seed, sales, marketing

## Introduction

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Applied Ecological Services, Inc. (AES) has established native plant and seed nurseries in 5 separate locations: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Indiana, New York and Kansas. Each location is a different market, and each has varying levels of market maturity. The operations vary in size and services offered but at a minimum, provide native plants or seed. Through this experience, AES has identified basic strategies to help build the need for more native plant and seed products. We feel that these strategies can be applied by any group, anywhere, to help build a stronger market for native plant materials.

For any successful restoration project, it is important to have locally available, genetically appropriate native plant products. It is our observation that areas with a good supply of native plant materials are typically in regions with an established ecological consulting presence; however, having the consulting presence alone, does not drive the need for the plant materials. Of course, habitat loss and land degradation near population centers are the primary drivers behind the need for native plant materials. Other factors such as strong contractual specifications, the ability of consultants to hold contractors to the specifications, public awareness of native plants, land conservation history in the region, and consistent failures of conventional methods to solve complex problems can also drive the need for quality native plant materials.

## Methods

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One of the primary methods to develop an increasing need for native plant materials is education. It is absolutely critical to make the public and professionals aware of the importance of native plants and the restoration process. Designers would otherwise find it difficult to apply natural processes in built environments without the approval of either of these groups.

Educating the public on restoration can come through several facets. Simple things such as, signage on established native landscaping and restoration projects or brochures explaining the use of native plants in the landscape can be very helpful to show the public what to expect. Helping the public make a paradigm shift from expecting mowed turf grass lawns to sustainable landscapes is the most important part of the process. If the public does not understand and accept the importance of native plants, and consequently demand their use, professionals will see no need to incorporate them in their designs.

## Educating the public

Increasing public awareness is the most important part of creating demand for native plant materials. This can be done through several methods.

1. Publications. Publications should be informative and describe any of the following: how the restoration process works; the best utilization of native plants in the landscape; or the benefits of native plants compared to non-natives.
2. Demonstrations. Public botanical gardens are a great place to install native plant demonstrations or trials. Many botanical gardens are already interested in native plants, and if they haven't already, are usually interested in setting these up. Demonstrations are particularly helpful because they help people visualize how natives are used in the landscape.
3. Persistence. Developing a market for native plant materials may not happen quickly or easily. One must be persistent and opportunistic to educate and demonstrate the importance of native plants to the public.

## Influencing design professionals

It is important for design professionals to fully understand how to use natives in order to have successful restoration projects. They often need to know basic information such as stocktype and species availability. As a local plant and seed supplier, you are the expert with the materials you grow, and it is your responsibility to educate designers. Unfortunately, it is common to see contracts that have native seed and plant specifications that are unrealistic. These poor specifications can lead to frustration for the contractor and ultimately contribute to project failure. If designers have the right information ahead of time, they can avoid these problems during construction. Regional native plant nursery producers should make available to designers information on:

species availability, stocktype availability, and basic plant requirements such as sun, soil, moisture, growing space, and plant phenology. Even this small amount of information will help designers avoid using the wrong plant in the wrong situation. Putting the right plant in the right place is crucial for the project success.

Along with helping design professionals better understand the product, it is also important for them to understand the native vegetation establishment process. The Target Plant Concept (Landis 2011) helps with this by covering information about a project from planning to planting. This includes understanding localized processes such as moisture trends as well as outplanting windows—critical factors in seedling establishment. As well, it is likely there are local publications that will provide helpful information. Armed with this information, designers can better educate their client and increase their chances of success.

## Summary

If you are in a region where the native plant market is weak or does not exist, implementing some or all of these techniques should help increase the demand for native plant materials. The underlying theme of developing a market for native plant materials is education. Regardless of your affiliation, public or private sector, if you want to see your region develop a stronger native market, it is important to be persistent. In the end, by using native plants for restoration, we hope to be good stewards of the land, public or private.

## References

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