

COTTONWOOD SEEDING AT THE MASON STATE TREE NURSERY

Hugh B. Wycoff, Nursery Superintendent  
Mason State Nursery, Illinois Department of Conservation,  
Topeka, Illinois

Our cottonwood beds are 42 inches wide inside, boxed in with 1 x 6 native lumber. Two rows of 1 x 6 bedboards are also used to divide the bed lengthwise into 14-inch strips. These interior boards serve as baffles to keep the cotton from drifting to the sides of the bed.

The 1 x 6 frame is covered with standard snow fence. The cottonwood catkins are hung from the snow fence wires. We hang a catkin in each space between laths in each of the three strips. This provides a row of catkins over each strip with the catkins about 3 inches apart in each row. Six-inch spacing would probably be sufficient with good catkins. The pods can also be stripped off the stems and scattered on the dry bed surface to open. When the humidity is low ripe pods open rapidly.

Burlap or Erosionet is placed over the snow fence to confine the cotton. The pods open under this covering. We do not start irrigation until sufficient seed has been dispersed on the surface of the bed. Once irrigation is started it is very important to keep the bed wet for several weeks. The covering is removed after the seedlings are established sufficiently to withstand heavy rain and other weather conditions.

Ripe cottonwood seed is creamy white; seed with a greenish cast is not ripe nor will it germinate well. With good seed we get too many seedlings. These can be thinned by removing the boards and placing the snow fence on the surface of the bed until the laths smother the seedlings under them. Additional thinning may be done with a cultivator or by hand.

Somewind action during seed dispersal is desirable, but too much will drift the cotton. We sometimes fan the cotton with a piece of cardboard to get better dispersal.

In a sheltered location where there is not much wind, and seeding of adjacent areas is not a problem, branches bearing catkins of seedpods may be scattered over the beds to be seeded. The pods will open and sow the seed. The paths and adjacent areas can be tilled to eliminate unwanted seedlings.

We find it necessary to use an insecticide, such as malathion, for beetles and a fungicide, such as captan, for leaf spot. Cottonwood seedbeds are fumigated prior to sowing to minimize the weed problem arising from the frequent irrigation and the slow initial growth of cottonwood seedlings.