



# Content Creation for Native Plant Nurseries

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**Figure 1**—Social media provides an open avenue to share growing techniques and experiences that might be different from what people usually expect. The growing table in the foreground was built to fit deepot tree pots (D60Ls) and accommodate 6-in (15.24-cm) drip emitter tubing. These peat-free, coir-free plants grew exceptionally well despite the commonly held belief in the nursery industry that it's not possible to successfully grow peat-free in small containers.

## Abstract

Social media is a useful and relatively inexpensive communication tool that can connect the public to the role of nurseries in supporting restoration and reforestation projects. Effectively connecting with the public requires intentionality and practice, and there are best practices, just as there are in the nursery industry. This article features examples of how to create and share social media content based upon experiences of owning and operating a private nursery and managing the Oroville School District's nursery. This topic was presented at the 2024 Combined WFCNA & ICSGA Meeting held in Wenatchee, WA, on September 4–5, 2024.

## Introduction

Of the daily tasks required to operate a nursery, creating social media content might not be prioritized in the face of urgent needs related to watering, weeding, and pest management. However, social media is a useful tool for connecting the public with the value of growing native plants, which can then generate more interest in native plants, plant propagation, and the many careers that go along with this work.

Fortunately, nursery work lends itself to being engaging and informative (figure 1). When creating content, it is important to be intentional but not overthink what you share. The challenge is remembering to take videos or photos of what you are doing and deciding what is appropriate to post. It's also important to consider what social media platform you are using. Instagram originally focused on photos but is now also popular for short videos up to 180 seconds long, called reels. (Stories posted on Instagram can only be up to 60 seconds long.) Facebook and Bluesky work well for sharing photos or videos, and TikTok features short and somewhat longer videos. YouTube is great for longer videos but also hosts short-form content. You can also go live on any of these platforms for longer periods of time.

## Choosing Content Creators

Creating and sharing social media content is just as much of a skill as propagating seeds, raising plants, or repairing irrigation lines. Finding individuals within your operation who are passionate about social media will help build your nursery's social media presence.

For example, the Washington State Nursery and Landscape Association (WSNLA) wanted to develop their social media presence to encourage young people to consider pursuing nursery- and landscape-related careers. While collaborating on developing the Level 1 Washington Certified Horticulturist program for high school students, I offered that students could help create content for WSNLA.

I recruited an unlikely team of social media interns: students in 7th, 9th, 10th, and 12th grades. The 12th-grade student had a paid internship funded by the WSNLA, and I supervised their work. The team produced content primarily designed to test myths and tips about plant growing found on TikTok and from other sources. One of their videos addressed a TikTok video of an individual who promoted dipping a rose cutting in honey, claiming that honey works like rooting hormone. I asked the students, “Do you really think honey is a rooting hormone? Let’s test it out.”

The students filmed themselves dipping groups of redosier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) cuttings in honey, commercial rooting hormone, or water, and then measured, compared, and filmed the growth a few weeks later to show the results. By creating these videos, the students contributed to the social media presence of an important organization in the horticulture field and felt part of something bigger.

## Identifying Your Audience

Once you know who will create your social media content, next you must identify your target audience. Does your audience already know the difference between native and nonnative plants, or is that something that you need to explain? It’s surprising how many people don’t realize that not all plants are native and why it matters. If your audience does know about native plants, how much do they know? And do they already care about native plants, or is this something you want to inspire?

To help picture your audience, find someone who is an example of the people you want to reach. My example audience is a person who lives in Okanogan County and operates a farm (figure 2). She cares about native plants and knows a fair bit about them. More importantly, she’s a lifelong learner open to learning new ways of doing things. When filming a video, I sometimes picture myself talking to her to make the experience feel less awkward, keep my focus on the right perspective, and come across more naturally on video.

## Deciding What To Share

When thinking of content to share on your social media accounts, consider the goal of your nursery operation. At Beaver Food Forest, I grow beaver food for ecological restoration, and my goal is to inspire others to seek out materials and methods for growing that will support ecosystem health. The potting media I use are peat free and coir free, and I post information that explains why I take this approach (figure 3).



**Figure 2**—Creating an example audience can increase the effectiveness of your social media content because it enables you to create more targeted and personalized content. Photo shared by the user on Instagram, 2024.



**Figure 3**—Inexpensive photo editing tools enable the creation of customizable images that can also be used to share information, such as this post that was shared on Instagram and other platforms. Photo by Julie Vanderwal, 2024.

The content I share shows the process of growing native plants: how I grow them and what I’m learning. For example, I made 17 different potting medium recipes this growing season and made videos showing how the recipes were made and how the plants grew in different mixes. I also made a video showing the “unboxing” of my first delivery of PittMoss, which is a recycled paper peatmoss alternative. The sack was 7 feet tall, and I was very afraid that when I cut into it, the product was going to spill all over the ground. Sharing that moment of uncertainty is something

that people can relate to. The product didn't fall out and remained intact, which ended up being funny after all the precautions I had in place to catch falling PittMoss.

In my nursery, I use milk cartons because they work really well for me, and they represent the circular economy of using a waste product instead of creating something new. I made a video on turning the humble milk carton into a “double decker” deep pot that encourages a longer root system (figure 4).

It is important to recognize that not everything needs to be posted. For example, we received a delivery of a semi-truck load of biochar. The delivery went sideways because I didn't realize that the soil was very sandy in the area where I wanted it delivered. The forklift became stuck, and the tractor became stuck while trying to free the forklift. I filmed the experience but realized afterward that this didn't have to be posted. Sometimes it's better to just be grateful that things worked out okay and not turn every event at the nursery into a post.

Also, not every post needs to cover a lot of ground. You can share thoughts, moments, and glimpses of your practice, as well as occasional deep dives into topics of interest.



**Figure 4**—Problem solving and innovation in the native plant nursery often generate shareable social media content. Several reels on Beaver Food Forest accounts feature unconventional uses for milk and juice cartons, a free resource that anyone can utilize. Photo by Julie Vanderwal, 2024.

## Creating Engaging and Consistent Content

I operate on three criteria for “postable” content: does it fit my audience, will it help me meet my goals, and will it draw the viewer in?

If you are prone to scrolling through videos on social media, after a while you see patterns of how people structure their videos—using the same hooks and formulas to make you stop and watch—and it can feel stale. However, you only have a couple of seconds to capture somebody's attention before they scroll away. Think of things that will naturally generate curiosity and make people want to keep watching. You can search online for “social media hooks” for inspiration. Avoid hooks that are manipulative or exclusive.

Here are some hooks that lend themselves to nursery content:

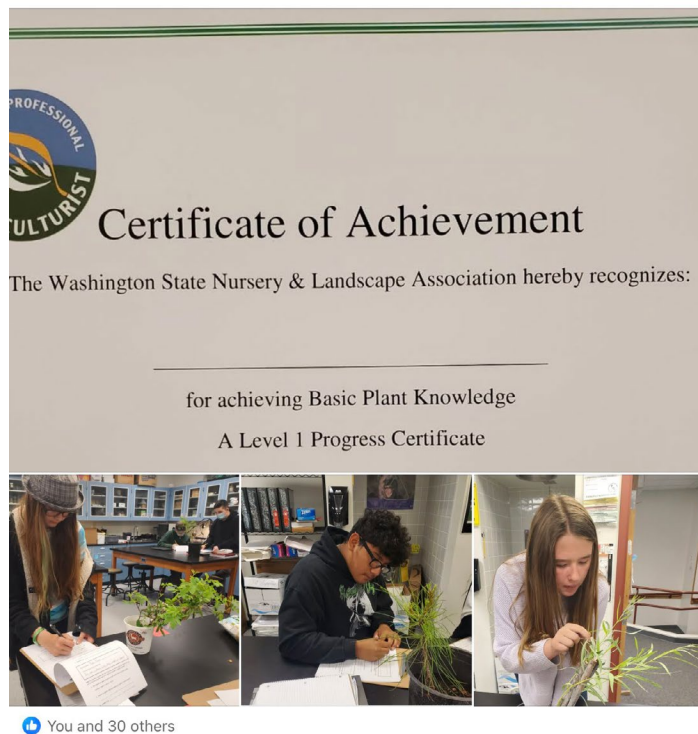
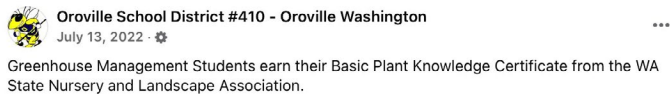
- Here are three reasons to (\_\_\_\_\_). Let the person know what the video is going to be about from the first moment. My “three reasons to mulch your plants with sand” video has the longest track record of all my videos, for people continuing to like and add to favorites on TikTok over time.
- “Here are five things I would do if I were starting over.”
- “If you're worried that (\_\_\_\_\_).” Example: “If you're worried that your compost from BCS Livestock might have weed seeds in it, check this out. I haven't had a single weed sprout in this pile in a whole year.”
- Pose thought-provoking questions, such as “Why not use peatmoss?”
- Tips for saving time or money when growing plants: For this hook, my videos might feature how to make your own potting media, or methods I've found for doing jobs more effectively. Example: “Here's a quick hack. If you want to grow a big plant really fast, use five big, long willow cuttings and put them all into one large pot.” That was a popular video.
- Reminders of what to do during each time of the year: Example: “October is a good time to make use of the natural stratification of wintertime. Plant your native seeds in containers outside and let them sit through the winter conditions, and see if they break dormancy and sprout in the spring.”

Photos are a good alternative if video creation is not practical. For example, the Oroville School District uses Facebook to share posts, which are often a photo with a couple of lines of text (figure 5). When taking a photo, you want to consider the lighting and whether a reader can understand what's happening. It's not always necessary to alter the photo (i.e., apply a filter or crop). You can upload the photo directly from your phone.

Video is useful to show a task or walk a viewer through how to do something, such as how to create a custom potting mix for

riparian or upland plants. My students created a video showing their attempt to scarify Saskatoon serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) seeds using a blender. One of my nursery's most popular reels, which has about 160,000 views, simply shows me dipping the tips of willow (*Salix*) cuttings in paint. The caption explains how latex paint color codes the cuttings by species, prevents evapotranspiration, and shows which way is up—in case I have help planting them. The music on this reel features the line, “Why do we do the things we do?” and helps generate curiosity. One of my TikTok videos—only 8 seconds long with one sentence of text—has more than 500,000 views and 2,000 meaningful comments. The majority of comments expressed genuine appreciation for what they learned, and many people said they plan to change their practices as a result of the video. Your content doesn't need to be long or complex to have an impact; and keeping your content simple makes it more feasible to post regularly.

No matter what hooks, music, or moments you decide to share, be yourself. People are drawn to authenticity—it will attract the people who are interested in what you're doing. If you are an introvert, bring that to the table, because some viewers don't want to watch someone using a lot of expressive, boisterous language.



**Figure 5**—Facebook posts can be simple, such as a photograph with a caption or a series of photos. When posting photos of minors, a parent's or guardian's permission is required. Oroville School District Facebook post, 2022.

A companion to creating engaging content is posting regularly. If you're going to have an account on any social media platform, posting daily helps build engagement. I struggle with this because I always have multiple, simultaneous projects. I have learned that not every post needs to cover a full concept. Instead, I can post a short thought or a scenic picture of my nursery at sunset with a caption.

Collaborating with others to create social media content can increase the number of viewers seeing your content and learning about what you're doing. For example, I collaborated with PittMoss on Instagram by posting a reel about how I use their product and selecting “invite collaborators” under “tag people.” Once they accepted the invitation, the reel was posted to their followers, some of whom then followed my account. The company I'm highlighting also benefits, as their followers see real applications of the product.

In another example, local agricultural producer BCS Livestock created a video describing their product, and I then stitched in my video afterward, sharing how well their compost works in our nursery. Another video collaboration was with the Western Washington University Sustainability Pathways program. Their students cleared hiking trails and salvaged native plants that needed to be removed, and I potted them in my nursery. I made a reel about the plants and invited Sustainability Pathways program to collaborate, which shared my reel to their feed (once they accepted).

## Conclusion

To have a successful social media presence, you need to take moments from your daily practice and find ways to share them with the world. You have to be willing to do things imperfectly and do your best to engage your audience—all within the sideboards of being your authentic self.

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