

Making Profit from the Swamps

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My topic, "Making Profit from the Swamps" might be made more general by calling it "Wetland Mitigation."

As a child I grew up in a floodplain area that had drainage ditches, springs, marshes, pot holes and spring floods. I hunted and fished these areas and became quite familiar with the plants that would grow under those conditions. Back then we called these areas swamps; today they have acquired the name wetlands. Tidal marshes, creek banks, and general bay and ocean shore lines are wetlands with a completely different type of plant life.

For the most part the nursery industry has concentrated on the obligate upland species for such things as soil erosion, windbreaks, and strip mining revegetation. The plants used most are natives. They are fast growing, adapted to a wide spectrum of soils and microclimates.

A nursery can specialize in three separate groups of plants--obligate upland plants, obligate wetland plants, and facultative species that lie in between.

As more environmentalists became involved in and concerned about landfills, highways, developments, fish and wildlife conservation, and air and water quality, they began to call for plants I remembered as a child. Plants like cattails, jack-in-the-pulpit, elderberry, alder, willow, skunk cabbage, wild rice, Virginia creeper, sumac, and the list goes on and on.

Nurserymen, including us, had calls for plants that were not readily available in our trade. The hard part, as always, was getting seedlings or liners and getting them in production.

As in any industry, to make a profit, you must know your field. You must know which seedlings to buy and which cuttings and seedlings you can produce yourself. You also need to know how many plants can be done from cuttings and have a projection of the numbers you will need to grow. This I call the "crystal ball."

Some of the native trees we now grow as ornamentals are willow, maple, birch, ash and oak. We also use shrubs such as blueberry, red twig dogwood, holly, and viburnum. Most of these are wetland plants.

To get started as a wetland mitigation supplier, I estimate you should grow 75 to 100 types of plants and have a good knowledge of suppliers who are growing others. Most growers have ponds, river-bottom land, sandy places, or low spots in their fields where nothing seems to grow well except weeds. Always remember to plant plants that will grow for you, not plants you want to grow.

We at Bobtown Nursery do some seedlings. We found that picking our own seed was the fastest way to get into production. We gather most of our seed from Virginia and Maryland areas. We treat these seed the same as we do seeds of Japanese maple, sweetbay magnolia, and dogwood.

In the fall we make the beds, then fumigate, add seed, cover with 1 in. of sand and a layer of pine needles. We top the bed with snow fence, which is removed when seed germination occurs.

Around December 15 we take cuttings from plants on our ditch banks, ponds, and

marshes. Two specific plants we propagate this way are black willow, *Salix nigra*, and Elderberry, *Sambucus canadensis*. We take cuttings that are 24 in. long and about 1/2 in. thick. The cuttings are placed in unsterilized topsoil in 1-gal containers. The cuttings are not sterilized or dipped in any rooting compound. They are maintained in a greenhouse at a minimum of 35F. Under these conditions, we have good root production and some top growth by February 15. By May 25 the plants are 18 to 24 in. tall, well rooted, and ready for shipment or transplanting. Alder and sumac are the next plants I will try using this method.

Most growers are slow to change their growing operations, saying, "It was good enough for my father, so it's good enough for me." This leaves little room for change. With the growing demand for native plants and the ever-changing economy, take a hard look at the swamps—I mean wetlands. These plants could be a good addition to your ornamental lines.