

Focus on Westscape Wholesale Nursery: Native and Adapted Plants for the Northern Rockies

by Linda Iverson

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The following interview took place between MNPS Landscape Committee Chair Linda Iverson (in bold) and Westscape Nursery owners, husband and wife team Robert Dunn and Laura Smith.

It's been an interesting evolution to go from a greenhouse of cut flowers to one full of carefully propagated native plants. How do you go from raising calla lilies and alfalfa to sage and rabbitbrush?

True, we come from academic agricultural research backgrounds, working for many years in alfalfa genetics and plant breeding, forage and pasture grass development and management. After we "escaped" academic life we started the wholesale flower greenhouses (Blue Moon Wholesale Growers), which was an entirely new concept for us. We had to learn on-the-go and the curve was very steep. With the advent of energy de-regulation in Montana we knew that our ability to be both competitive and profitable was about to change. At that time we were the only year-round grower/wholesaler in the state. With de-regulation came a tripling of our energy prices and it was at this point that we realized we needed to diversify to survive. We began to slowly phase out of flowers and into the native plants nursery; using the infra-structure of the flower business to support the growth of the nursery.

We both had long standing personal interests in range plant ecology and reclamation and thought Westscape might be the place to put those interests into practice. Bringing in Chris Mahoney, of Mountain West Reclamation, as an associate was a natural fit in that he came from that type of background and had a lot of experience in reclamation practices. We knew there was a huge, growing

demand for native/adapted material in other parts of the West and the Rockies, and felt that Montana was beginning to increase in interest as well. Laura was particularly inspired by seeing native and naturalistic landscaping happening in other parts of the country, specifically the southwest and northern California where desert plants or woodlands were substituted for lawns.

Westscape has given us an opportunity to move from a business that required 365 days a year of input (the flowers of Blue Moon Wholesale Growers) to a more seasonal business that allows us some time off. Also, the energy demands of the flower business have been greatly reduced to a more manageable level by switching to natives that can leave the greenhouse after only a few weeks.

Westscape is a containerized nursery operation in Bozeman. The inventory is almost totally native, over 150 species. They also carry a small but thoughtful collection of adapted ornamental grasses and waterwise perennials. This season, they are greatly expanding their selection of wetland plants, e.g. sedges, rushes, and other aquatics, to complement their riparian shrubs. I asked them about their propagation methods.

We use a variety of propagation techniques and protocols across all of our plant material, be they grasses, perennials, shrubs, forbs, or trees. The method of choice is generally predicated upon a number of factors including ease or difficulty of propagation, availability (both commercial and collectable), timing (i.e. if we have a short notice order for a 5-gallon plant that we do not have on hand, then starting from seed is not going to work), and ultimately, the bottom line frequently dictates the methodology, i.e. what is the most economical and practical way to produce a given species. Ideally, we would like to do everything from seed or vegetative cutting, and we certainly do as much as reasonably possible, but practically that is not universally possible.

As for specific techniques—virtually all of our grasses are seed propagated by us, on site. The exceptions would be a few species that are asexually propagated

(plants are sterile and seed is not available) or when obtaining seed is difficult. In these cases, we purchase plugs or divisions, and then grow them on. Perennials are propagated both from seed and from plugs depending on factors mentioned above. The majority of our sages, and rabbitbrush, are seed propagated. We grow many of our shrubs from seed with the exception of *Amelanchier alnifolia* (serviceberry), which requires numerous stratification steps. We also carry some non-native cultivars that we purchase bare root. Exceptions are various willow and cottonwoods that we do from both vegetative cuttings and from seed. Some willows do not readily propagate from cuttings (a common misconception) and require seed propagation.

As for sources of material, native versus non-native, Montana versus anywhere else, these are widely debated topics, as you know, and there is likely no "correct" answer. This is a whole discussion in itself; does native mean Pre-Columbian, pre-Lewis and Clark, or for that matter, even pre-Native American? Many Native American cultures were nomadic and roamed far and wide, often carrying their seeds and plants with them. Trade routes among pre-Columbian Native Americans stretched from Central America to Ohio. Many goods, including seed and plant material, traveled these routes prior to the arrival of Europeans. The flow of genetic material is dynamic and always changing, be it by humans, animals, water, or wind, and knows no political or, at times, even geographical boundaries.

Our general take is this; we recognize the demand, desire, and in some cases, the importance of having a "true native" from a specific ecological niche. Our goal is to provide and produce plant material that is widely considered to be native to the region, or at least adapted to the conditions of southwest Montana and the general region, and expect it to perform and thrive accordingly. Certainly, where we can obtain material locally, we take every opportunity to do so and are always conscientious about where all of our material originates. Also, we are continuing

to expand our own geographical customer base and are selling plant material regionally as opposed to just in the Bozeman area.

Do native plants have special needs when grown in containers?

We look at natives as we would virtually any other plant. Generally speaking, common sense rules; we try to ensure that everything gets adequate water, and fertilizer, and we manage for disease and insects when necessary. We do have some "unique systems" for over-wintering that we believe ameliorate the effects of long winters, early falls, late springs, wind desiccation, etc. We have experimented with various mycorrhizae additions and formulations but at this time do not have any set protocol. We know that most "commercially available" products have little efficacy. It's an important and interesting area of research and we try to keep abreast of what's going on.

What's in your future? What direction will you take?

We want to continue in the direction we've been heading, that is to say, each year we want to expand the nursery both in terms of growth and diversity. We are not interested in becoming "an all things to all customers nursery" but instead want to focus on providing quality native and adapted material at affordable prices and keep the business casual and friendly. We hope to continue to expand our customer base of landscapers, designers, retail nurseries, architects, and reclamationists. We're very interested in the reclamation, habitat enhancement arena, and hope to expand our presence in meeting the needs of those customers, including custom and contract growing for these types of projects.

Another goal is to do more of our own collecting of seed and vegetative stock, and reduce our dependence on commercial brokers. We see this as a benefit to our clientele and us, but collection in Montana presents some challenges. Collection requires a number of factors be considered, including locating species that are relatively accessible, field identification, and just being in the right place

at the right time. Many species are ephemeral and have short windows for collection time and seed viability (willows and sages are a great example). However, we figure at the least, field collection will get us out and away from the nursery more often, and provide an excuse to take a hike!

You can find the complete list of Westscape plants and more information about their operation by visiting: www.westscapenursery.net or call 406-522-3797.

Although Westscape is a wholesale nursery and does not sell retail, they have open house days for native plant enthusiasts and are known to cater to MNPS members!