

Windflower Native Plant Nursery: Re-establishing Native Plants in Northwest Montana

by Betty Kuropat

from Kelsey, Winter 2008

At Windflower Native Plant Nursery, hundreds of young native plants are tucked in for the winter. But activities are far from dormant. Winter is time to stratify seeds; prepare for germination; clean pots, trays, and tools; update species' lists; coordinate spring orders; and update the website. Terry Divoky is the owner, horticulturist, sales manager, and bookkeeper; in short, she is Windflower Native Plant Nursery. The nursery is at Divoky's home on the shore of Halfmoon Lake, at the base of the Apgar Mountains, about a mile from Glacier National Park.

The core of Terry's business is getting people to use native plants. As the population in the Flathead area grows and expands into rural areas, she wants to encourage people to use native plants to give back some of what is lost in development. Native plants help maintain the natural landscape and provide for wildlife, birds, butterflies, and bees. Education and ethics are as big a part of her business as is growing and selling plants. She loves to talk with people about why and how to grow natives and the ecosystem benefits they provide. She usually works in a discussion of weed prevention and the risks of commercial wildflower seed mixes. She is always excited to see how many people are interested in native plants.

Terry specializes in growing plants native to northwest Montana. She uses locally collected seed to help maintain the genetics and provide plants adapted to the Flathead area. She sells most of her plants to landscapers and private land managers. She often contracts to collect seed and grow plants for those clients. One of them landscaped Deep Creek Ranch, near Choteau. I wonder if David Letterman knows his ranch headquarters is landscaped with Windflower's native

plants. Clients often ask Terry for landscape designs, in addition to plants. At first she declined; wanting to focus on growing her nursery business and not confident with her design skills. Now she includes landscape design into contracts for some clients. Terry also has a retail branch with outlets at the Whitefish Farmers Market, sales from her website, and word of mouth. She ships plants all over the country. The farmers market was a slow way to establish clients. It was more of a novelty for market-goers for the first few years. But her knowledge and enthusiasm, not to mention her healthy and beautiful plants, are good marketing tools. Now, after five years, people come to the market specifically for her plants.

Terry's inspiration for native plant gardening that led to the nursery business began when she joined the Montana Native Plant Society in 1989. There she met Mary Sloan who mentioned that she grew native plants in her garden. Mary and Gary collect seed when they are hiking and plant them to see what happens. They showed Terry their garden and she thought it was great; fun, beautiful, and environmentally sensitive. So, she started doing the same in her gardens. Over the years, she heard more and more people say "someone should start a native plant business in the Flathead." A few people occasionally offered natives at farmers markets, but nothing consistent. One nursery, called Nursery for Native Plants, operated successfully for several years. In the early 2000's, Maria Mantas, who was also growing natives in her garden, set up a green house and established Stillwater Native Plant Nursery. Soon after, Terry joined Maria as a business partner. Terry learned a lot about the plants from Maria and they both learned a lot of nursery skills. Terry took over the business and changed the name to "Windflower" when Maria moved from the Flathead in 2004. Terry credits many of her Plant Society friends for inspiring and motivating her, and teaching her about native plants, their environments, gardening, and propagating. Among them are Mary and Gary Sloan, Maria Mantas, Sheila Morrison, Joyce Lapp, and Peter Lesica.

Windflower Nursery is truly a home-based industry. A small greenhouse doubles as winter tool storage and a shade house doubles as winter storage for dormant plants. Several "theme" gardens around the house have plants growing to maturity, as experiments, or simply to look nice. Terry's house is partially taken over by plants, especially in fall and winter. In late summer and fall, the office and any other "spare" space is occupied by drying seeds. In fall and winter, the kitchen becomes a seed stratification lab. Some seeds need warm stratification on the counter or near the heater; others need cold stratification in the refrigerator or freezer. Each baggy and container of seed has a label with the species, type of stratification, date in, and date to move out to germination trays. A big tub of soil sits mixed and ready on the kitchen floor. Fall is also time to wash and bleach pots—in the bathtub. After the seeds are stratified, they are sown in germination flats and moved to the garage under grow lights. Most species germinate in the dead of winter, just when the Divokys would love to park their cars inside. As they develop in the spring they are moved to the greenhouse and transplanted into individual pots. Every species has its own particular requirements. Some are ready to sell less than a year from seed collection; others take two to four years to develop and become rooted and hardy enough to plant into a garden.

Windflower's 2008 plant list is extensive. There are more than 40 species of forbs, two grasses, and eight shrubs. Most of the shrubs are new to the nursery and are considered "experimental." Landscapers and home gardeners apparently have different favorites. Landscapers prefer bee balm (*Monarda fistulosa*) and anything aster; including asters, fleabane (*Erigeron*), arnicas, and blanketflower (*Gaillardia aristata*). Best sellers for home gardeners include blue flax (*Linum perenne* var. *lewisii*), penstemons, alum root (*Heuchera cylindrica*), silky phacelia (*Phacelia sericea*), prairie coneflower (*Ratibida columnifera*), bee balm (*Monarda fistulosa*), clarkia (*Clarkia pulchella*), and yellow columbine (*Aquilegia flavescens*). Terry says she never has enough columbine, and if she could grow beargrass (*Xerophyllum tenax*), she would sell "tons." Some species are

challenging. Terry says arnicas are temperamental, lupines don't like to be moved, lily family species take three to five years to develop a bulb, and arrowleaf balsamroot (*Balsamorhiza sagittata*) needs special pots and takes several years for the long taproot to develop.

Terry is working on a Spalding's catchfly (*Silene spaldingii*) restoration project with Peter Lesica. She is growing plants to supplement the population on Wild Horse Island in Flathead Lake. In partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Peter collected the seed, Terry will grow them, and they both will out-plant the seedlings. The seeds are currently in a two-month cold stratification in plastic food containers in the refrigerator. Terry and her husband, Dennis, gave up beer space for these seeds. After stratification, the seeds will germinate in flats in the garage. In spring, they will move to the greenhouse, then the shade house, and be ready to plant by fall.

The nursery keeps Terry busy. But that's only a fraction of all she accomplishes. Terry works full time teaching library and media information skills as elementary librarian for Columbia Falls School District. She says she has no time for anything else; that's why she plans to retire from teaching after this school year. However, she does fit in other activities. She is active on neighborhood land use planning committees. She is a "core" member of the Flathead Chapter of the Montana Native Plant Society. She and Dennis have three active dogs that get at least one walk every day, and like to bury bones and lay in the gardens. In the summer she hikes and kayaks, in the winter she likes to cross-country ski.

A visit to Terry's website is well worth your time, even if you aren't interested in buying plants. Her communication skills and passion for education are evident. There is a wealth of information about native plants, including individual species' descriptions, frequently asked questions about gardening with natives, an overview of the nursery, beautiful pictures, as well as links to other plant sites.

Visit <http://www.windflowernativeplants.com>. You can also call Terry at 406-387-5527 or e-mail to tddivoky@centurytel.net.