

## Native seed

**When land management groups perform restoration projects in Central Oregon, they need plants that fit the environment. And that's why this nursery is stocked with familiar species.**

By Kate Ramsayer / *The Bulletin*

Published: September 23, 2009 4:00AM PST

REDMOND — To the untrained eye, the 50,000-plus sedge plants growing tall in Mike Lattig's greenhouse pretty much all look alike.

But Lattig recognizes the slight differences between the 14 different species growing at his Clearwater Native Plant Nursery in Redmond.

"If you look, this is dark green," he said.

Others are lighter in color, some are taller or have denser root systems. Some thrive in an inch or so of water, others dwell in marshy meadows.

And on Thursday, Lattig will deliver them to Camp Polk Meadow, where people will plant the grasses to help stabilize the banks of Whychus Creek as part of a major restoration project.

Since 2003, Lattig has operated a native plant nursery, specializing in grasses, shrubs and trees that come from seeds he collects locally. And most of the company's business comes from organizations like the Upper Deschutes Watershed Council and land management agencies who restore riverbanks and other ecosystems, Lattig said.

They're looking for plants that will do well in Central Oregon's specific environments, and so Lattig and his employees provide thousands of plants from seeds found close to home.

"Plants just perform better in their own habitat," Lattig said. "You can buy some of these species probably in every Western state. But something from Colorado or Western Washington shouldn't do as well as something grown in Central Oregon, because they're adapted."

So if a restoration project calls for willows, he'll go collect willow seeds from trees growing nearby.

His business started out as a hobby in Idaho. While doing seasonal river restoration work, he grew native plants and donated them to tribes or organizations.

But when he moved to Redmond, he turned his hobby into a job.



Pete Erickson / The Bulletin

Mike Lattig's Clearwater Native Plant Nursery specializes in native plants for restoration projects. Lattig collects seeds from the wild and grows them to seedlings already adapted to the Central Oregon environment.

While he still does some work for individuals, most of his business is the large restoration projects, Lattig said.

“Right now we have enough to keep us busy,” he said.

#### *Wild seeds*

For the Camp Polk effort, which will involve 150,000 plants, he'll grow about 20 different species of sedges, willows, cottonwood and other plants to jump-start the habitat — and the majority will come from seeds gathered within a few miles of the site.

But it's not as easy as collecting seeds and throwing them in the dirt.

First, Lattig gets approval from the landowner to collect seeds on their property. Then, at the right time of year, he gathers the seeds — some so small they're not much more than a speck of brown.

Different species need different care, he said. Some of the bigger seeds have to be cleaned by hand. And even then, many aren't viable.

For the Camp Polk project, Lattig put some of the seeds in water to see if they would float — if they did, they were empty and did not contain an embryo.

Some plant species, like willows, will germinate within a day, while Lattig takes care of others for months before they will sprout.

For many of the Deschutes plants, it's a process of trial and error to find the optimal growing conditions.

“It's really hit and miss with wild seeds sometimes,” he said. “You never know what you're getting into.”

#### *Genetically local*

The Upper Deschutes Watershed Council has used Clearwater's plants on several projects, like Camp Polk and some of the Tumalo Creek restoration work, said Ryan Houston, the organization's executive director.

“We want to make sure the plants we're putting in the ground are not only native species, but are genetically local,” Houston said. “We don't want to bring in a willow from Idaho or a willow from Montana. ... Plants that have evolved here are going to survive here better.”

Lattig knows the landscape, Houston said, and knows where to go to find alders, willows or other plants. Plus, local plants are from stock that has already survived in the soils and climates of the Deschutes Basin, he said. And using a Redmond nursery means that the little plants don't have to be trucked over the mountains from Salem or Portland.

“We can maximize our probability that the plants are going to survive and do well,” Houston said.

#### *Healthy plants*

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife turned to the Clearwater nursery for help with a project at the Sunriver marina and other areas near the General Patch Bridge, said Jack Williamson, a fish habitat restoration biologist with the agency.

Vegetation along waterways is an important part of fish habitat, he said, since native plants provide homes for native insects that fall into the water and are eaten by native fish. And local plants also provide the right amount of shade.

So last winter, Williamson and Lattig went out to the site, and Lattig looked at what was already growing nearby and made a list of plants appropriate for that stretch of the Deschutes River.

"I leave it up to Mike to figure out what's naturally occurring in the area," Williamson said.

Lattig started growing Douglas spirea, dogwood, sedges, willows and more, and crews planted some earlier this summer and will plant the rest next month.

A plant's chance for survival depends on what happens after it is placed in the ground, Williamson said, and whether it's too hot or cold or wet or dry.

But, he added, "having healthy plants seems like a great place to start."

Kate Ramsayer can be reached at 541-617-7811 or [kramsayer@bendbulletin.com](mailto:kramsayer@bendbulletin.com).

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