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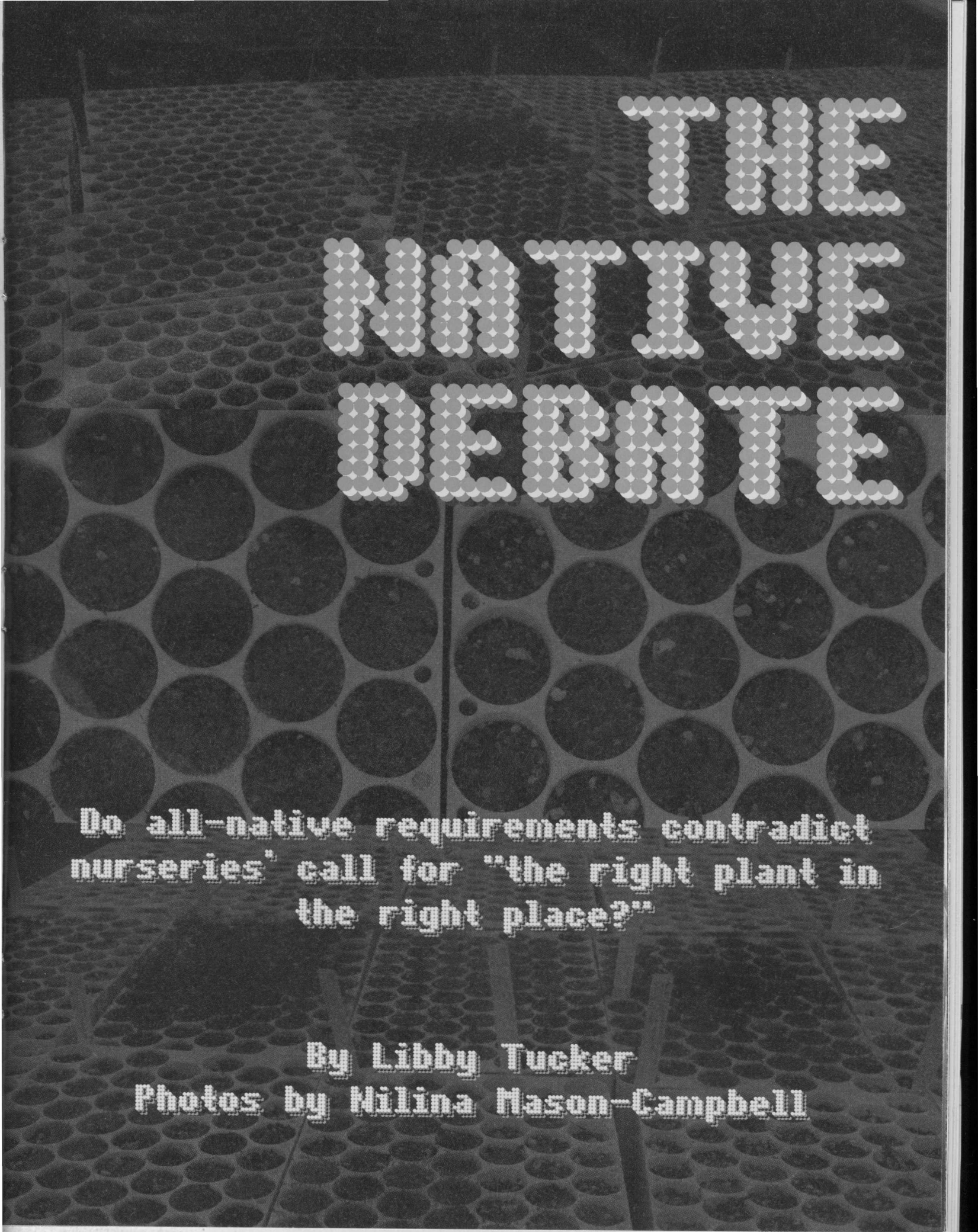
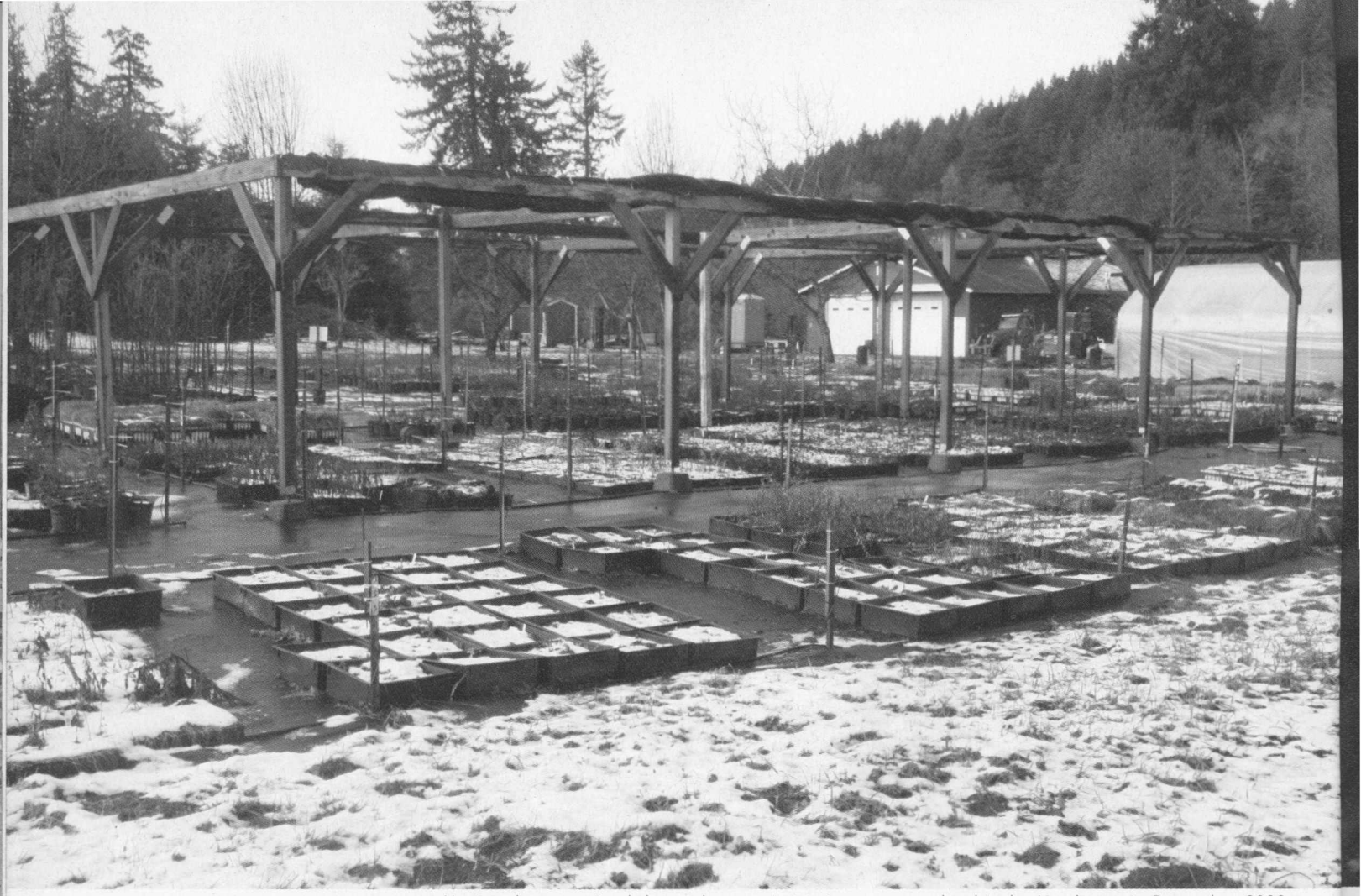
26. The native debate: Do all-native requirements contradict nurseries' call for "the right plant in the right place? Tucker, L. Plants at work: growing the living market, March 2009, p. 24-26. 2009.



THE NATIVE DEBATE

Do all-native requirements contradict nurseries' call for "the right plant in the right place?"

By Libby Tucker
Photos by Nilina Mason-Campbell



Native plants survived the uncharacteristic winter storms that hit the Northwest in December 2008.

A blanket of fresh snow covers the rows of prairie grasses, wildflowers and the wetland emergent beds at Metro's Native Plant Center in Tualatin, Ore. It's January and the state has just suffered a series of severe ice storms that devastated the spring harvest of many commercial nurseries near Portland. Surveying the beds, however, botanist Marsha Holt Kingsley says she isn't worried about her plants.

"We didn't lose a thing out here because it's all natives," says Holt Kingsley, who manages the center for Metro, a regional council serving Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties and 25 cities in Oregon. "We don't even have a heated greenhouse."

Native plant species are better suited for extreme weather conditions than cultivars of native plants or imported plants, she explained, because they're accustomed to the soil and hydrology of the region. This so-called "adaptability" also makes native plants ideal for Metro's Willamette Valley restoration work. The plants require little maintenance once they're installed and they boost diversity by attracting native insects and animals back to what was once monocultural or disturbed land.

Come spring, these hardy plants, grown from seeds collected within a 20-mile radius of Portland, will help stock Metro's natural areas. The regional government, which only uses native plants in its restoration projects, opened its own specialty nursery three years ago in order to grow the rare herbaceous natives it couldn't find on the commercial plant market. Native trees and shrubs were easy to find, but Metro was missing the under story: the wetland plants, oak prairie plants, sedges and forbs that bring color and help restore diversity to an ecosystem, says Holt Kingsley. Last year marked the Plant Center's first big production year, with a harvest of 250 pounds of native seed.

"It's amazing to see what happens as soon as you put in this diverse jumble of plants," says Holt Kingsley. "There's all kinds of birds and critters where it was just a bunch of blackberries to begin with. Diversity is so key in doing our restoration work, and it's this herbaceous layer that's key for shelter and materials to nest with."

The Native Plant Center has drawn heated criticism from some commercial nurseries, however, that feel Metro's definition of "native," and its all-native rule, may be too strict. Though most nurseries agree that native plants are often the best option for restoring natural areas, there are instances in which native plants won't thrive. As a result, many commercial nurseries have adopted a philosophy of placing "the right plant in the right place"—whether or not it's native to the site.

The right plant for the right place

"The idea that native plants are more adaptable is bullshit," says Kali Robson, a botanist at Nothing But Northwest Natives Nursery in Woodland, Wash., and author of "Encyclopedia of Northwest Native Plants." "It's very species-specific."

Pacific dogwood, a native ornamental tree, for example, is "quite fussy," Robson says. It needs the right growing conditions in order to thrive. "It'll get sunburned or drowned and it's susceptible to anthracnose," she adds. Red twig dogwood, a close relative, is much hardier, she said. Similarly, planting yarrow, Douglas aster, or salmonberry, if it's in a moist location, will take over the site. "Sometimes that's a good attribute if you're trying to beat back the nonnative stuff."

(**Above**) Some native plants take years to establish roots. (**Right**) A Metro employee holds native grass seed harvested at its nursery.

Planting native fescue on the roadside could also be a problem. The perennial grass takes time to set its roots and won't guard against erosion on a steep bank, says Linda Boyer, a restoration biologist and native plant manager for Heritage Seedlings in Salem, Ore. A less-expensive, nonnative grass such as oats or annual rye grass might actually perform better in the beginning, acting as a cover crop as well as establishing a bunchgrass structure for birds to nest in, Boyer adds.

"We have a perfectly good red fescue perennial ryegrass with the bunchgrass structure," Boyer says. "So if you're trying to save money on a site, you don't need to plant the native."

Natives for restoration

The decision to use natives should ultimately be based on the desired "habitat value" for a property, Boyer says. In most cases, native plants from within the site's ecoregion and elevation provide the greatest value for attracting pollinators and other wildlife. But Boyer says she's not opposed to using cultivars as long as she can prove it's as effective as the native, she says.

Metro's Holt Kingsley also subscribes to the notion of the right plant in the right place. Though, she says, more often than not natives fit that description best, even in urban areas where local governments are trying to preserve wildlife corridors through cities to reduce habitat fragmentation and increase diversity within cities.

Oregon's nursery industry sees value in natives, but because it exports most of its plants, it is resistant to a mandate to grow only natives.

"I'm hesitant to say native plants should be planted in urban areas, because that's not really a native landscape for them," says Holt Kingsley. "And there are a lot of stressors, such as being in a parking strip. But in our bioswales and rain gardens, the right native plants can do very well."

In choosing native species for its restoration projects, Metro very rarely uses plants that originate outside the upper Willamette Valley for fear of "outbreeding depression," an instance where plants from outside an ecoregion contaminate the genetics of plants native to a specific area. But inbreeding depression, in which a population becomes so isolated it loses genetic diversity, could be a bigger problem in fragmented urban areas, according to Boyer. Inbreeding limits diversity, leaving plants less adaptable and more susceptible to disease.

The market for natives

The Oregon Association of Nurseries favors exchanging the term "native" to "well-adapted" plants, in which every plant is evaluated on its merits, including its traits and ecosystem functions, and not solely on its genetics. The nursery industry has spent years researching and developing cultivars with characteristics such as pest-resistance that make the plants better adapted to modern ecosystems, says Jeff Stone, a lobbyist for the Oregon Association of Nurseries. Limiting what's planted in a natural area that was formerly a development, for example, could actually hinder restoration in some cases.

"We get hung up on the word native. What does that mean?" Stone says. "Does it mean the plants Lewis and Clark found when they came through here? Or is it the natural evolution of plant material over time that's able to sustain the changes in environment and also provide things that people want?"

Because Oregon's nursery industry ships 81 percent of its plants out of state, OAN is also worried Metro's rule will eventually lead to an all-out ban by state or local governments on growing non-native species on or near public lands. After all, what's not native to Oregon is native to another state.

"Having an expectation of a certain type of plant and creating a standard for it I believe leads to a regulation that thou shalt only use that plant," Stone says.

Despite industry concerns, however, nurseries aren't likely to ignore the growing demand for native plants brought about by increased awareness and acceptance of natives for use in restoration as well as urban applications including constructed wetlands and rooftop gardens.

"I think there will be a shift in the industry as far as more native plants," says Vicqui Guevara, co-owner of A Valley Growers Nursery in Hubbard,Ore., which has specialized in growing native plants for 17 years. "It will grow and become more popular now that architects are realizing the value of native plants instead of only planting the ornamental, ho-hum deal."

More info

Plant Native provides information on where to find nurseries that sell native plants, information on native plants, and resources. *www.plantnative.org*

Portland Metro has its own native plant nursery and a mobile native plant garden for community education. *www.metro-region.org*

Oregon Association of Nurseries is working to define the word "native" for its members. *www.oan.org*

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