

COST CUTTING PRACTICES AT S. C. NURSERIES

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At our nurseries in South Carolina we are concerned with growing the best quality seedlings at the lowest possible cost. I am sure that every nurseryman here has this same objective. The importance of providing seedlings, particularly to the small private landowners, cannot be overlooked. We know that we will need to grow more timber on all forest lands if we are going to meet future timber demands. Good quality, low cost seedlings should help a landowner make up his mind to get his land in maximum timber production.

I am not going to report on any one major thing we are doing at our nurseries to cut costs but will mention several things that have helped us keep our seedling prices as low as possible. These are practices that will not apply to all nurseries but perhaps will be of interest and help to some of you.

Assigned Seedbed Areas for Weeding

At Tilghman Nursery we have used a weeding system for several years that although it is not new in the tree nursery field it is not generally in use in the southeast. What we are doing is assigning a given number of seedbeds to each weeder. The weeder is given the responsibility of weeding the beds assigned to him, doing the work himself. Generally, he would be assigned about three million seedlings to seed of slash or loblolly pine. We decided to try this system since it is impossible to find enough labor to operate our nurseries as we used to. With labor shortage we have not been able to pick up the part-time help we need to assist with weeding. In past years when we were able to hire extra labor for weeding we would assign a crew foreman to make sure that the work was done correctly. As it is now we would have to send eight to ten people to the field to do weeding without a foreman. From experience, we have found that a weeding crew usually sticks together regardless of the amount of weeds. If you assign two weeders to a bed of seedlings (one on each side) and there are more weeds on one side of the bed than the other, the person having less weeding to do will stay back with his partner. Or if you have twenty weeders and are weeding ten beds of seedlings, several of which have more weeds than the others, all twenty will move along at about the same speed.

When a given area of seedbeds is assigned to one person he develops a certain pride in keeping his area clean. He wants his seedbed areas to look good and better than his co-workers. They just naturally do a better job and can take care of more seedlings per man than when working together. Another advantage is that if poor weeding is done such as unnecessary damage to seedlings, you know who is responsible and the problem can be more easily corrected.

Before attempting this system of controlling weeds, a nurseryman would have to know his nursery areas really well. Good sanitation would have to be practiced and herbicides used as necessary.

We haven't attempted to come up with an exact figure on how much we are saving by using the assigned bed method for weeding. We do know that it would cost us about thirty percent more for weeding if we used the more conventional method of a weeding crew at Tilghman Nursery.

In the near future I feel that with the use of herbicides, weeding will be a lesser problem at our nurseries. A labor force of two to three people should be able to remove all the weeds from a crop of 20,000,000 seedlings.

Bed Inventory

I have always thought that the best way to handle the lifting and packing of seedlings is to use a large crew to grade and count the seedlings before packing for shipment. With good labor you can expect to have 1,000 good plantable seedlings in every bundle that you ship.

The shortages of labor and money at our nurseries have forced us to use other methods to grade and count seedlings. Presently we are counting by weight and field cullings when necessary before lifting. Field culling is normally done about a month prior to lifting.

For large orders and for most of our custom grown seedlings we have been using bed inventories to determine the number of seedlings shipped. This is a variation of our usual procedure which I have mentioned, in that we do not weigh the seedlings before they are packed in bags. A single bed of seedlings is lifted and packed without weighing. The bags are filled to capacity. The number of bags packed with seedlings from that particular bed is divided into the number of seedlings in the bed (bed inventory) and this number is written on the bag. i.e. bed inventory 50,000 - number bags packed 40 - average per bag 1,250.

By using this method we have accomplished two things that cut costs. First, we have eliminated the weighing process cutting down on labor time and second, we have made full use of the seedling bags by filling them to capacity. Those of you who are using the Kraft polyethylene bags know that quite often because of the variation in the size of the seedlings the bags are not always full when packed with 1,000 seedlings. The company or individual obtaining the seedlings packed in this manner may have to be a little more careful when keeping tract of seedlings received or when dividing them between planting sites. I am sure that this problem is easily solved.

We have not run any studies to determine the amount saved by using bed inventory counts rather than weighing. We do know that by filling seedling bags to capacity we can expect to save several hundred dollars in bag costs at each nursery annually. This would be in addition to savings in labor.

Packing Seedlings in the Field

With mechanical seedling lifters in use at many nurseries there has been more interest in perfecting a system of packing seedlings in the field. Although we do not have seedling lifters at the present time, we have been packing seedlings in the field at Ridge Nursery on a trial basis.

The seedlings are undercut and lifted in the usual manner. A tractor pulled trailer is used with scales rigged on the trailer. As the seedlings are lifted they are placed directly on the trailer, weighed and placed in Kraft polyethylene bags. As the bags are filled they are hauled to the packing shed so that the top of the bag can be sewed and the packaged seedlings can be placed in cold storage.

With a small labor crew at this nursery we have had to use the same crew for lifting and for weighing and packing. If the seedlings are packed inside this means having the crew lift seedlings for part of the day and then bringing the same crew to the packing shed to pack the seedlings. By packing in the field our labor time is reduced allowing us to pack more seedlings in a given length of time with the crew that we have. Our labor costs have been reduced by about one-third when using this system.

I would like to emphasize again that I am not recommending these cost saving practices for all nurseries. Some of them haven't worked for us at all of our nurseries. I do think that they are worth considering and feel sure that some of you will save money if you try them.