

Needs and Benefits of Nursery Accreditation

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Introduction

It appears, from observations reported by both private and public nurseries, that there are nurseries that do not have adequate quality assurance procedures. Species are being mislabeled and incorrect seed sources are being sold. It appears that some nurseries have entered the market ill prepared to provide quality seedlings. On the other hand, why should anyone listen to an established nursery instead of a new nursery that is selling a less expensive seedling? Nursery accreditation would be one way for a reputable nursery trying to follow correct practices to distinguish themselves from those that do not. Accreditation may also assist in supporting claims a nursery wishes to make concerning its products. For example, a nursery may produce seedlings with a particular strain of mycorrhizal fungus. Accreditation is one method that can be used to certify that the mycorrhizal seedlings do, in fact, possess mycorrhizae. Another nursery may wish to certify that their products are developed and grown for use within a particular state or region while another may wish to certify for superior timber production.

Benefits to Nurseries

The first benefit of accreditation would be to raise overall industry quality. While established nursery programs are not having the problems mentioned earlier in regards to seed source, new players entering the market have been found to have problems. Therefore, there is a need to have a standard. A standard would help support established programs to continue good practices (keeping them in business) and serve to educate newly organized nursery businesses.

Secondly, there are immediate benefits to a nursery that accredits its program. Accreditation would encourage tighter management. If we know someone is going to look at what we do, we will do a more thorough job. This is simply human nature. Accreditation should also help achieve recognition within our own organizations that we have a quality program. This, in turn, can reasonably justify training for personnel as well as having good facilities. Accreditation can help focus on priorities; what gets counted gets done. Finally, the records required by an accreditation process will prepare a nursery to answer challenges to its work. Every nursery manager has to face customer complaints from time to time. A completely documented program from seed source identity to sowing through pack and ship will put the manager in position to answer objectively any questions raised from outside the nursery concerning seedling quality.

Aspects and Components of an Accreditation Program

The accreditation program would be strictly voluntary and open to any nursery or seed plant wishing to participate. No one would be prevented from selling seedlings from an unaccredited nursery or seeds from an unaccredited seed plant.

A participating nursery would need to prepare a standard operating procedures manual and a quality assurance manual. These can seem overwhelming at first look, but are simply a matter of saying what you will do, doing what you say, and proving you did it. These are more than bureaucratic exercises. They are excellent ways to maintain control of the nursery or seed plant and to instill pride in quality work among employees.

A participant would need to declare a scope of accreditation. Scope refers the area of expertise for the nursery. Perhaps the nursery would seek accreditation in growing bareroot longleaf pine seedlings, while another, mycorrhizal Virginia pine.

Accreditation Body _____

The accreditation body is the organization that reviews the manuals and conducts the audits and, finally, issues the accreditation. One possible accrediting body that could work for forest and conservation nurseries and seed plants is the Livestock and Seed (LS) Program, Audit, Review, and Compliance (ARC) Branch, Quality System Verification Program (QSVP), which uses ISO Guide 65 as a standard. This program provides voluntary conformity assessment and accreditation services to approved service providers to facilitate the marketing and distribution of agricultural products. The ARC Branch is an independent third party, and strives to provide services in accordance with accepted industry practices and internationally recognized guidelines. All services are provided on a cost-recovery basis with fees as nearly equal as possible to the actual cost of providing the service. The standards used are developed by the industry or sector of the industry. The USDA would not set the standards; the role of USDA is to meet the industry needs in a way that assists it to have credibility with the public.

Basic Steps to Accreditation _____

Application materials are prepared and submitted to the Agricultural Marketing Services (AMS) for review. After the AMS reviews and accepts the materials, an onsite audit is conducted. Upon passing the audit, the nursery's accreditation status is posted on the AMS, LS Program's Internet Web site. Official USDA shields, stamps, logos, or other marks may then be used on certified products, correspondence, advertising, and promotional material to signify that the nursery has been accredited for the claims it makes for its products. The accreditation is a means of marketing a good product, not a government inspection program.

References of AMS Accreditation Programs _____

- ISO Guide 65—Requirements for bodies operating product certification systems.
- ISO 19011:2002—Guidelines for quality and/or environmental management systems auditing.
- ARC Instruction 1001—Process Verified Program.
- USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. 2004. USA Accredited Seed Laboratory Program. <http://www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/arc/asl.htm> (accessed July 8 2004).