Montana State University Forest Tree Nursery

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MISSOULA—Probably the most productive patch of agricultural land in the State of Montana is an 80 acre plot that lies on the flat a little west of Missoula. The sign over the gate says that this is the Montana State University Forest Tree Nursery, and in the year just ended, that plot produced more than a million and a quarter seedling trees that found a home on 2,400 acres of Montana land.

As this is written, the acreage is under snow -- and so is the desk of nursery superintendent Don Baldwin. In the latter case, it's a snow of letters, because during the Christmas holidays about 500 Montana farmers and ranchers took the time to get in early orders for trees to be planted during the coming spring. Baldwin is happy about all that mail. To him it looks like an indication that the MSU nursery will be called on for something like a million and a half trees this year.

The tree production program on the "mighty 80 acres" is no new thing. Records show that it has been going ever since 1928, when the State of Montana set it up under terms of the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924, for the purpose of helping Montana farmers plant shelterbelts and woodlots. To give some indication of how the idea has been catching on of late, last year Baldwin and his aides shipped out more trees in a single season than the nursery produced in its first six years of full operation.

Within the past five years, the nursery has grown about four and a half million seedling trees for shipment into every county in the state. Requests for the seedlings come in from a variety of sources including county agents, service foresters, work unit conservationists and vocational-agricultural instructors who pass along orders that originate on Montana farms and ranches and with the members of 4-H and FFA forestry projects. Baldwin's production...
line goes into operation as soon as the nursery stock can be moved about the latter part of March. The nursery shipping facilities are going full blast in April when 90 per cent of the shipments are moved, and they taper off about the middle of May. During the rest of the season, the crew gets ground and stock ready for the following year's deluge of orders.

It is difficult for anyone to visualize the meaning of a million and a half seedlings, so Baldwin states matters another way. "During 1960," he says, "we shipped stock to plant 711 acres of forest, and 1,730 acres of windbarrier. That latter figure is equivalent to 297 miles." The total impact of the "mighty 80 acres" on the Montana landscape up to the end of the year was something like 3,327 acres of forest plantings and 17,862 acres of windbarrier. One fact that Baldwin has noted with considerable satisfaction is that more and more marginal cropland is being returned to forest. He believes that eventually this may be Montana's insurance against running out of timber. While the acreage is still small, a start has been made and it is likely to grow considerably in area, he believes.

The MSU Forest Nursery over which Baldwin presides is a model layout, complete with office building, tool and implement housing, packing and supply sheds. The boundary fence encloses 200 acres, including the "mighty 80 acres" used for seedling production. Generally speaking, it's a busy place most of the year, getting ready for a new season, handling the packing and shipping rush, cleaning up afterward and then getting ready for a new season again.

Any bonafide farmer or rancher in the state can get a supply of the nursery seedlings for a modest price through his county agent, but the little trees must be used for shelterbelt or forest planting. They can't be used for ornamental plantings, and they can't be sold as transplants.
More than 20 varieties of trees and shrubs are supplied from the MSU nursery, with Douglas fir making up the bulk of tree shipments, and with caragana and Russian olive leading the shelter belt shrubs. However, honeysuckle, lilac and chokecherry are sent out in quantity, and there are several varieties of willows, cottonwood, elm trees and three other conifers in the list. Not all of these will grow to maturity, because the seedlings fall prey to weather and soil problems. Baldwin feels that many more of the seedlings would make it if planters would follow the simple expedient of getting ready for the little trees a year ahead of actual planting time.

"The transplants are likely to make it if the ground has been allowed to lie fallow the previous season, and if the planter has done a good job cleaning out the weeds," he states. "Weed removal is particularly important, because if we encounter a spell of dry weather, the weeds will rob the seedlings of ground moisture," he said.