

**Name: Taynuilt Trees**

<http://www.taynuilttrees.co.uk>

**Place:** Taynuilt, Argyll

**Headline:** A small non-mechanised tree nursery in a rural location, growing native trees of local provenance and operating in a competitive market.

**Keywords:** Micro-business, tree nursery

#### **What is the context?**

Demand for native trees of local provenance grew strongly in the 1990's, providing new opportunities for both large mechanised nurseries, and for small nurseries supplying trees for native woodland schemes in specific regions. Local tree nurseries are one of several ways that people can develop a livelihood in a rural location.

#### **What was the initial aim**

Established a small nursery to provide an income for one family growing trees. This started by supplying mainly native Scots pine.

#### **What actually happened as a result and what has been achieved ?**

A 0.4 ha plot in a walled garden was rented from an estate and the nursery set up, using a traditional rotation system (seedbed, transplant bed, green crop). This built on contacts and markets first established by Peter Wormell, supplying Scots pine to the forestry management company Scottish Woodlands Ltd (who planted them mainly on Blackmount Estate). The species range was extended to native broadleaved species and annual production grew to about 100,000 trees. The special connection, where Scottish Woodlands Ltd preferentially bought plants from Taynuilt Trees, was expanded and has been maintained for 23 years. The bulk of customers are professional foresters (still mainly Scottish Woodlands Ltd), and conservation organisations, planting under grants. The nursery supplies small quantities of trees to individuals, crofters and farmers: effectively a retail market, comprising around 15% of production.

Taynuilt Trees has benefitted from working with some larger nurseries to access economies of scale. This has involved supplying seed to other growers from a local area; and having them plant grow plants that can be marketed locally to meet the demands of larger schemes, so as to smooth out the variabilities of seed supply. However note that recently the numbers of Scots Pine grown has reduced radically – close to zero, due to Red Band Needle blight which has destroyed grant support for planting.

The nursery has sustained its production for over 20 years and still provides a modest annual income for the partners Peter and Jane McCracken. They have managed to make a livelihood for themselves, buy a house and raise a family on this income, combined with their own resources. The partners have kept horticultural skills alive in the community that might easily have been lost.

Contact with customers buying small numbers of trees has spread the message about using appropriate provenance trees for creating native woodland.

#### **What is the evidence for these outcomes?**

**Years trading 1993 – 2016: 23**

**Average annual production: 100k native plants.**

**Total numbers of trees produced:** approximately 2 million plus.

**Paid jobs created:** 2 full time; occasional part-time; maternity cover etc. (unpaid volunteers have never been used).

**Typical annual turnover:** £40-55k.

**Knowledge passed-on:** numerous training courses have been run over the years, plus talks and nursery visits involving foresters; students; conservation groups; mental health professionals; school groups; other aspirant micro-nursery growers.

### **What were the factors that contributed to those outcomes?**

The partners were fortunate to have a small amount of capital to invest in the business and they also had a loan from the Princes Trust in the first 5 years. Subsequently the business has had no debts beyond the usual year to year credit cycles. They were also very lucky to have a skilled and committed mentor in Peter Wormell, in the early years.

The business acknowledges a large debt of gratitude to Stuart Johnson of Scottish Woodlands Ltd who has supported them from the start. The company has been prepared to pay premium prices for their trees (even in years when schemes have been cancelled due to late approvals), so as to secure a supply of local provenance plants for their customers. The quality and survival rates of the trees have helped win this support. This long term relationship has created crucial stability for Taynuilt Trees, who are vulnerable to sudden losses of large orders. To find a commercial organisation adopting this approach is rare and its importance cannot be understated.

The nursery plot was available to rent at a low cost under a secure agricultural tenancy (security that is an unheard of today). Similar small parcels of agricultural land are now very hard to come by, either to buy or rent.

The partners had a vision of a way of living which included working pretty hard in an outdoor physical job for modest rewards. They had sufficient personal resources to allow them to experiment with making the business and the life-style work. Underpinning the business has been state funded Forestry Grants for new native woodland creation for Taynuilt Trees customers.

### **How replicable is this experience and what is its potential as an element of a better approach to forestry?**

Growing trees for sale can potentially be part of activity for community groups or individuals wishing to operate on smallholdings. A realistic aim might be simply keeping young families in a local area. The low returns and high levels of physical labour outdoors is a deterrent where other options exist, and jobs created are not often highly prized. In horticulture generally, nursery work is increasingly done by foreign migrant workers. So it takes special people in special circumstances.

In the case of Taynuilt Trees it may be that the business could continue in the same way that it started, with another young couple wanting to take it on. However, the tenancy situation makes a transfer out of the family unlikely as the land is more valuable for housing development should the landlords have a chance to get it back.

Small local tree nurseries are a small but important sector supporting local economies and skill development.

### **Key messages**

### **What works**

- Everybody can see the benefits of a local business like this, and skills circulate in the local economy. The relationship between the nursery, and in this case, a Scotland-wide forestry management company with a local base was crucial. As the years have gone by the personnel has changed, but the relationships remain solid.
- Stability of the market is crucial; rational planning and implementation of planting grant schemes over a longer time scale would help.
- To be financially viable, micro-nurseries need to work with other larger nurseries to access economies of scale.

### **Weaknesses**

- Using a very small 'micro' nursery model to produce trees makes it hard to produce large numbers of plants in any given year and plants are more expensive than from large "industrial" nurseries. At the same time planting schemes are getting bigger and time scales from application to planting are getting longer. Providing stability to small producers can be hard to justify in a commercial environment.
- FES could do more to support local suppliers by delivering well planned, reliable planting programmes.
- Not many individuals are prepared to work in this way anymore – this is after all why the nurseries were centralised and mechanised in the 1960's
- As a business, a nursery is relatively cheap to set up, but is unlikely to create a business asset that can be sold at retirement, especially on rented land.
- Small nurseries (*in fact ALL nurseries*) are vulnerable to changes in government policies which are planned on short time scales and driven by politics rather than common sense or vision.