



# Native Seed: An Introduction to Income Opportunities from Native Seed Gathered from Small Private Forestlands in the Pacific Northwest

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## Examples of Native Seed Species for Restoration in the Pacific Northwest

- Huckleberry
- Cascara
- Indian Plum
- Devil's Club
- Lupine
- Deer Vetch
- Elderberry
- Beargrass
- Milkweed
- Fireweed
- Paintbrush
- Camas
- Larkspur
- Fawn Lily
- Oregon Iris
- Biscuit Root
- Sorrel
- Trillium
- Stinging Nettle
- Oregon Grape
- Western Azalea
- Thimbleberry
- Hooker's Willow
- Salmonberry
- Bleeding Heart
- Snowberry
- Western Geranium
- Monkey Flower
- Cow Parsnip
- Goatsbeard
- Columbine
- Shooting Star
- Honeysuckle
- Baneberry
- Soapweed Yucca
- Spirea

## Overview

Native seed is commercially harvested from hundreds of species of native plants in the Northwest. Many species, such as Roemer's Fescue and tree seed cones, are raised in agricultural or nursery settings and harvested by machine. Others are gathered by hand and sometimes by machine from the wild. The vast majority of native seed is used in restoration

projects, such as along new roadsides, or other development projects, such as golf courses and housing subdivisions, or to prevent erosion after a major land disturbance, like a forest fire. The native seed industry has been around many decades, but is expanding as the ecological restoration industry and landscaping with native plants in general expands to become more commonplace.



Photo of native grass seeds

## Harvesting and Processing Native Seeds

There are too many different ways to collect native seeds to give specific instructions in this overview, but there is a fairly extensive literature on different techniques, much of it available free on the Internet through the U.S. Forest Service, National Seed Laboratory, state natural resource offices, nonprofit organizations, university extension offices and more. In general, the collection process typically requires waiting until the plant has produced seed toward the end of its growing season. For flower seeds, you might knock the seed off into a container. For cones, you might pick them from the tree, dry them, and then tumble them to remove the seed. For forbs, you might use a machete or sickle to cut the stem with seeds; and for berries, you might strip the plants by hand, wearing gloves. Again, the technique varies widely so read up and then give it a try. Quality control to guarantee seed purity is essential to many seed purchasers, but sometimes not depending on the end use. Many seeds are tiny and cross contamination with other species or varieties can be difficult to see in seed storage. Buyers of seeds will typically do random checks or ask to see proof that the seed they are buying is clean. Although large seed operations can have expensive processing machines and storage systems, a small operation can maintain good quality control by being organized and diligent about keeping clear records on where and when a species was harvested and keeping it isolated from other seeds during processing and storage. Again there is extensive literature to help with seed procurement and processing for all levels of business.



Beargrass in bloom. Beargrass seeds are one of many species used for restoration.

Some examples of native seed wholesale prices per pound in 2012 are as follows: vine maple- \$70; kinnikinnick - \$125; oceanspray - \$50; Pacific rhododendron - \$350; and pipsissewa - \$1,600. Many factors affect price, including abundance, difficulty in harvesting and quality control, and market demand. Most small landowners will have many different commercially valuable seed species occurring on their land. If you have less than 50 acres of land, you may have to harvest many different species to make a profit. On large acreages, you may be able to harvest greater quantities of fewer species. You could potentially make an arrangement with a professional seed collector or seed business with a crew to harvest on your land, but more likely you and/or your family would be providing the labor yourself. There isn't much seed in a forest that can be harvested by machine and machines can be expensive, so assume time consuming manual labor. However, for those landowners who are often out on their property doing regular management such as thinning, harvesting other nontimber forest products, or other activities, developing the capacity to harvest and market native seed from your land may be an easier source of extra income than it would be for

others. Also, you would have the benefit of creating your own locally genetically adapted seed supply for use on your own restoration projects.

## Marketing

In recent decades ecologists began to realize the importance of using locally sourced seeds that are genetically adapted to local conditions. This fact provides an advantage for local, small producers that can guarantee and describe local seed provenience over those companies unable to show where their seeds are from. Climate change may become an important variable as well, as changing temperature and moisture regimes may result in rapid shifts in plant populations in some areas. This does not mean that ecological restoration is abandoning the use of locally adapted seeds, but new practices may emerge, such as including or emphasizing plant material that is resilient to changing conditions. For small forestland owners interested in supplying native seed to the restoration industry, we recommend they approach existing seed producing businesses and buyers to learn what and when they are buying and what steps you would need to take to become one of their suppliers. There are also some niche market value-added opportunities such as creating packets of wild seed to sell retail through a farmer's market or online, for example on Amazon Marketplace. If you go online be sure to research restrictions by individual states on the exporting native seeds to their state, because one area's native seed can be another area's invasive species.



Douglas fir seed cones for sale.

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