

Native Seed Knowledge Exchange in Seattle

What does it take to collect and distribute native seeds for restoration? In early September, the recently formed Puget Sound Seed Partnership, an offshoot of the Pacific Northwest focused Forest Adaptation Network, brought together area plant and restoration professionals with experienced native seed collectors to dig into this question and more.

The day began with an introduction from the event's organizer, Rolf Gersonde

of Seattle Public Utilities (SPU), who shared the Seed Partnership's vision of supporting the local native seed economy through knowledge exchanges like this one. SPU, like many in the restoration space, recognizes that the supply of native seeds, and the pool of qualified seed collectors is not sufficient to meet current needs for native plant propagation in the Pacific Northwest. For more information on this, check out this [webinar](#) previously hosted by treeline, as well as several [articles](#) on the topic.

In recognition of this gap in the seed industry, Seattle Public Utilities funded the workshop, plus participation stipends for individuals who are underrepresented in the industry. The funding came from an impact investment fund that is used to strategically invest in private sector green business opportunities and jobs that help the utility more sustainably manage waste and water in Seattle. "We're very thoughtful about 'spreading the wealth' and opportunity to small



Photo Credit: Kayla Seaforth

businesses and people who have been historically under-represented in these industries,” shared fund manager Kahreen Tebeau.

The workshop’s technical content was delivered by Emily Wittkop, owner of Jonny Native Seed, and Alex Slakie, owner of Flora Northwest. Combined, these two brought decades of experience collecting native seeds and other plant materials to the workshop participants. They sought to drive home three tenants of high quality seed collection:

1. Seed quality over quantity
2. Proper drying and cleaning
3. Adequate labeling and storage

Throughout their presentations, they emphasized the importance of developing deep knowledge of the plants and the ecosystems they are a part of. “One of the best things you can do to get to know plants is spend time and build a relationship with them,” said Alex.

Both collectors have learned their trade through mentorship and a lot of trial and error, they shared with a laugh. Native seed production sits in an interesting space, where effective collection and processing techniques have been developed for some species, especially those with high commercial value, but for many others that are important ecologically and culturally, the methods remain low tech, and few industry standards are widely available. Instead of being disseminated by trade groups or other formal assemblies, knowledge of seed collection practices is largely held by individuals, businesses, and organizations and passed from person to person over time.

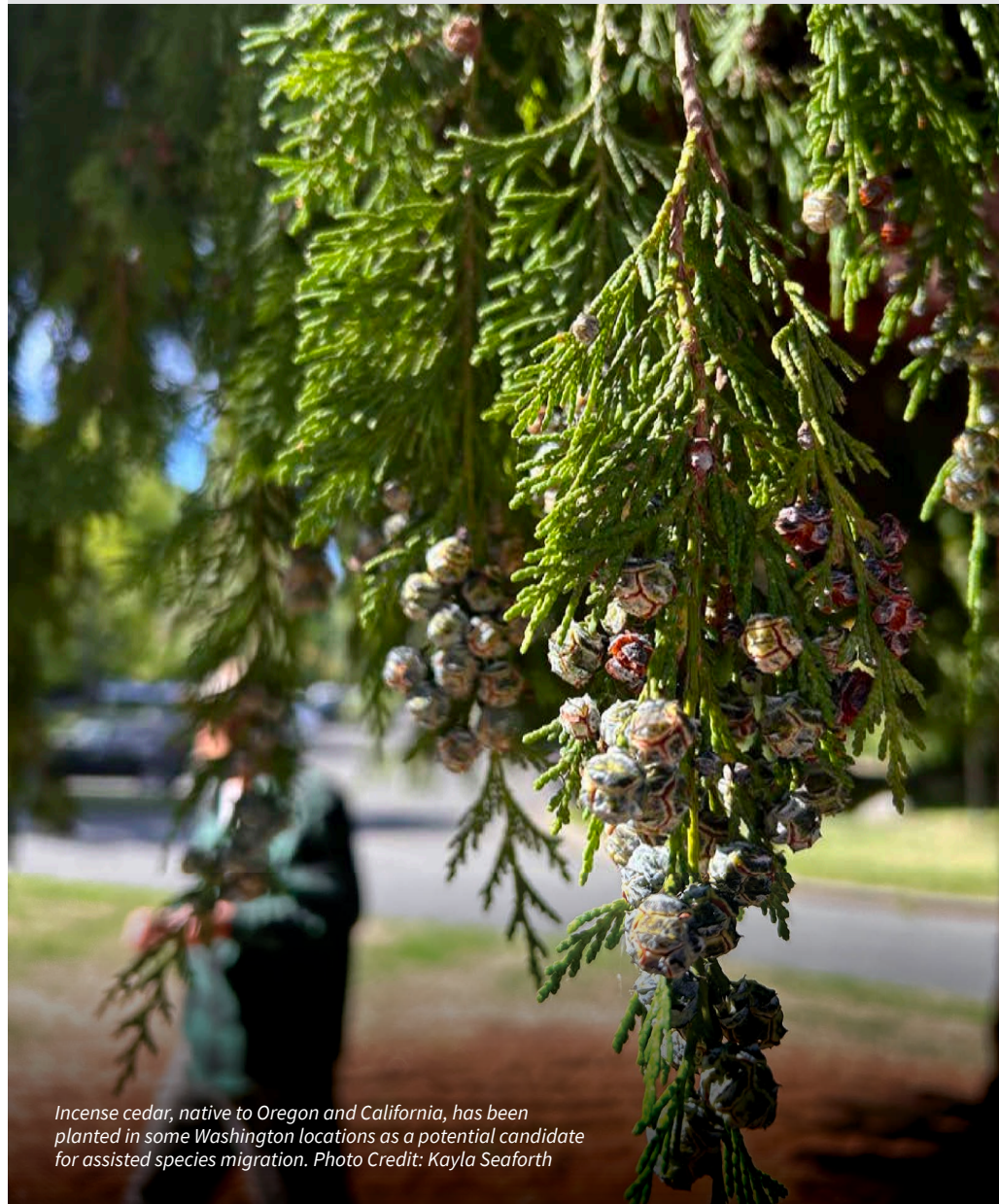
In this tradition of knowledge exchange, Emily and Alex shared the ins and outs of their trade. They presented on how to assess populations for potential collections, quirks of collecting different kinds of seeds, obtaining site access permissions, site scouting, the difference between collecting locally and potentially future adapted plant materials, and more.

The second part of the workshop took participants outside to examine different seeds in Discovery Park in

Puget Sound Seed Partnership and the Forest Adaptation Network

The Puget Sound Seed Partnership (PSSP) vision is to increase the availability and affordability of genetically diverse and ecologically appropriate native plant materials for use in the greater Puget Sound Region, to support the local native seed marketplace, and to support ecological restoration and reforestation. The PSSP was envisioned as a collaborative effort of entities to improve the availability of seed and plant material to its partners for reforestation and ecological restoration of native ecosystems in the larger Puget Sound Region.

The challenges of seed supply in North America and the Pacific Northwest for restoration and reforestation have been recently highlighted and emphasized by the partners of the Forest Adaptation Network. This collaborative partnership between reforestation and restoration practitioners, seed supply businesses, and plant material nurseries was formed as a means to address these challenges.



Incense cedar, native to Oregon and California, has been planted in some Washington locations as a potential candidate for assisted species migration. Photo Credit: Kayla Seaforth

Seattle. Emily and Alex encouraged the group to pluck rose hips, maple samaras, fringe cup seeds, snowberries and more to illustrate how to quickly assess whether seed is ripe, likely to be viable, or obviously damaged by pests or other developmental issues. Workshop participants enthusiastically inspected seeds, asked technical questions, and a few even brought out their own hand lenses and field microscopes to take a closer look.

Those who attended the workshop also brought their own knowledge and experience to the group, and were happy to share what they knew about different aspects of plant materials collection. For example, the manager of the City of Seattle's Jefferson Greenhouse shared how their program collects and propagates native ferns through spore germination for restoration plantings. Another participant from the Snoqualmie Tribe shared how some tools used for berry collection

can permanently damage plants and encouraged collectors to use other methods, and prioritize respect for the plants and the tribes that rely on them for food and medicine.

The day wrapped up with a demonstration of how to clean and process the seeds the group collected. Alex and Emily showed off their trusty Dybvig seed cleaner, a device that uses water and agitation to separate seeds from their fruit, creating a slurry of seeds that are then dried and screened further to remove non-seed material. They also gave a tutorial on how to winnow seeds, a low tech process that uses a fan and a series of containers to clean seed further. Participants also got to work with mining screens and a wooden device called a seed boat or de-awner, which can be useful for removing grass awns or separating seeds from hard pods.

The atmosphere throughout the day was convivial; a small part of the native plant

community coming together to dive into the wild forest that is native seed collection, turning over leaves and logs and discovering all kinds of delightful connections in the process. The Puget Sound Seed Partnership intends to host more workshops on seed collection in the future. Participants and facilitators both acknowledged that the material covered was highly distilled, and further learning opportunities could facilitate a greater depth of knowledge, reach more people, and deepen community and connection among those who work with native plants.

Interested in Joining the Puget Sound Seed Partnership or Participating in Future Workshops?

Contact Rolf Gersonde at Rolf.Gersonde@seattle.gov to receive updates.

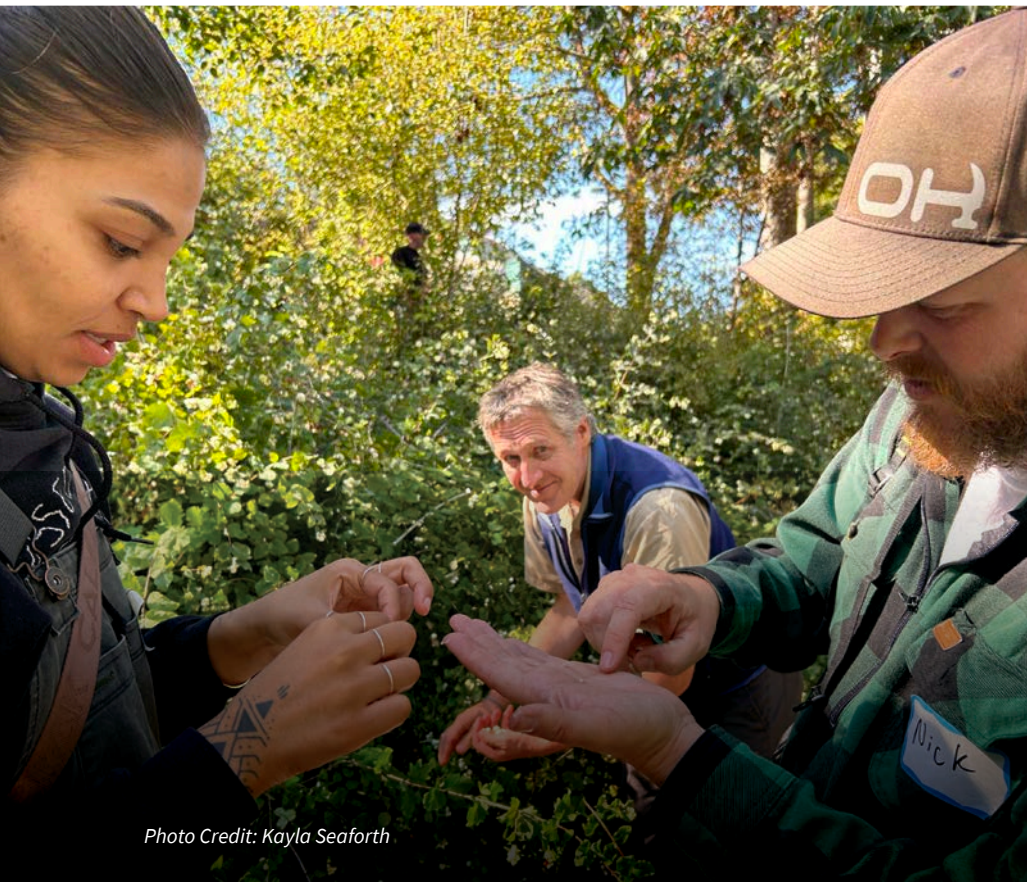


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