A Decade of Coordinated Plant Procurement Increases Planting Capacity and Collaboration in the Willamette Basin

By Hannah Buehler and Jean-Paul Zagarola, Bonneville Environmental Foundation (BEF)

BEF's Collaborative Grow Program was established in 2011 to streamline native plant procurement for groups advancing reforestation and plant establishment as part of ecological restoration, soil and water conservation, and habitat initiatives in Oregon's Willamette Basin. From an initial order of 66,000 plants over a decade ago, the program will distribute a record 1,042,500 plants grown by seven different nurseries to thirteen tree planting partners in 2022.

Modeled after programs developed by large agencies in the Portland Metro area who sought ways to increase internal efficiencies, the Collaborative Grow Program was created to bring those same efficiencies and other benefits to smaller organizations and departments, and works with:

- Watershed Councils
- Land trusts
- Tribes
- Agencies
- Other NGOs

One of a number of initiatives developed to support partners in their efforts to increase the pace and scale of primarily riparian and floodplain plantings on public and private lands, the Collaborative Grow Program has evolved to also support fire recovery efforts.

With limited staff capacity and significant demands placed upon groups, the program offers a means to leverage economies of scale to:

- Reduce staff time within individual organizations and nurseries directed towards plant ordering and distribution.
- Centralize quality control and plant specification development and adaptation (i.e. minimum and maximum size specifications, target root:shoot ratios, seed source ranges).
- Increase the diversity of species grown at scale by local nurseries (the Collaborative Grow program currently offers 52 tree and shrub species) by building a clear and more reliable demand.
- Provide access to plant stock with greater genetic diversity because partners receive plant stock from numerous nurseries.
- Soften the impact of species failures in a given year due to factors such as flooded nursery fields, seed issues, etc. by facilitating species substitutions, spreading the impact of shortages across groups and supporting partners in offering plants to each other.
- Support use of bare root planting stock to reduce plant, transportation and labor costs.
- Offer financial benefits to groups that often rely on reimbursement-style grant funding and for whom carrying large balances for 5-8 months in the form of plant deposits can be difficult or untenable.

Project Manager Jean Paul Zagarola inspects bare root plants. Photo Credit: Hannah Buehler

Through a centralized cooler rental agreement with a local flower farmer, the Collaborative Grow program stores plant materials after they are lifted, bundled and bagged at nurseries in January of each year and allows partners to stagger site planting timelines through March. This arrangement allows multiple partners to coordinate more effectively with planting contractors, helps increase flexibility among project managers and contractors to support better alignment with factors ranging from schedules to landowner/manager preferences to variable and sometimes unpredictable site conditions such as flooding that can impact access or planting feasibility.

Over time, the program has evolved to provide additional benefits, including:

- Coordination with researchers, restoration practitioners and nursery operators to develop and adapt practical seed source and seedling specifications
- Sharing of best management practices
- Guarantees to nurseries that they will have a purchaser for the stock they are growing
- Funding for plant materials and stewardship

The Next Ten Years: Continued Adaptation and Collaboration

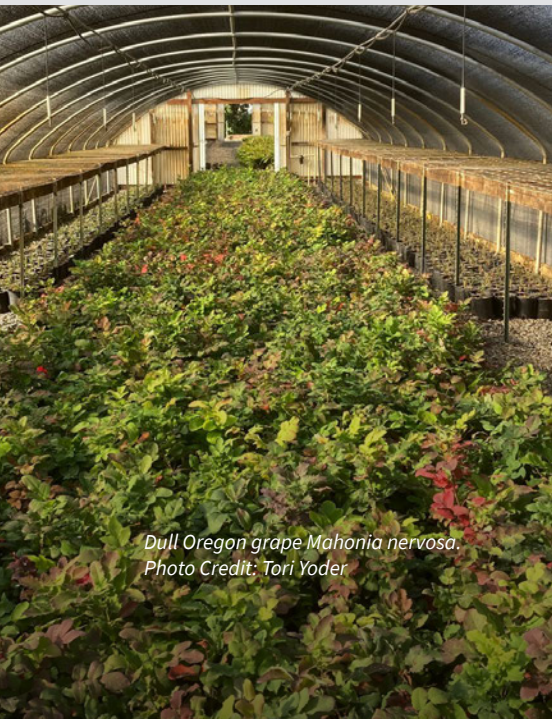
As nurseries and planting partners alike work to adapt to a changing climate, the Collaborative helps strengthen the adaptive capacity of all groups involved. Diverse partners allow the Collaborative Grow Program to absorb impacts of nursery shortages or restoration projects that fall through. If nursery partners have species strained by extreme weather conditions, planting groups can still usually receive that species from one of the many other nursery partners. If planting partners have a project fall through due to unforeseen access or weather related challenges, the plants they ordered can be distributed to other regional planting partners rather than going to waste.

Small planting entities and nurseries have a significant role to play in climate change mitigation and adaptation. These entities are well positioned to observe and track how plants are responding to climate-driven changes. Through the Collaborative, partners can share lessons learned and strategies to adapt to new conditions. For example, Collaborative Grow partners are finding that under some conditions and with some species earlier planting dates are correlated with higher plant survival. In response, the program is working to coordinate with nurseries to lift and distribute plants earlier than previous years where it does not negatively impact the integrity of seedlings.

The work of partners to scale revegetation efforts has led to the development of significant regional expertise and a vibrant contractor sector. But challenges remain:

- Certain species are difficult to grow, and some nurseries are shifting their production capacity.
- Labor shortages have caused significant stress and strain, and have driven price increases that can pose a challenge to groups who are locked in to grant budgets written years previous.
- Large scale fires have increased demand for plants.

As the program continues to grow, change and adapt in the coming years, we are working to assess the need for a similar collaborative in other areas of the Pacific Northwest. We'd love to **hear from you** if coordinated plant procurement is something that is needed in your region!



Dull Oregon grape Mahonia nervosa. Photo Credit: Tori Yoder

Cooler manager Juan tracks inventory, pulls project orders and keeps operations running smoothly. Photo Credit: Kas Guillozet