

Ben Alexander teaches a shoreline vegetation class out in the field.

Restoring Washington: One Native Plant at a Time!



Author: Heather Clarke

For more than two decades Ben Alexander has been working to turn back the clocks of time.

He takes damaged land and works to restore it back to its original condition — before it was spoiled or disrupted by industry, humans, or other factors.

Alexander loves his job because it combines his interest in nursery work and his love for the outdoors, “It’s why I got into this field, to help restore natural areas. I love hiking, backpacking, camping and being outdoors — so it’s a perfect fit.”

Located in Olympia, Washington, Sound Native Plants is owned by Alexander and Susan Buis.

The company provides services such as wetland mitigation plantings, stabilizing steep slopes and soil erosion areas, building shoreline buffers, installing temporary irrigation systems, and planting along roadsides...services that are all important in complying with today’s increasing environmental regulations.

Sound Native Plants is unique because

it specializes in full-service restoration work — taking care of every aspect of a restoration project. The owners’ philosophy is to strategically plan and design the landscape, grow and install the best native plants for the location, and maintain and monitor the plants as they adapt to the newly restored location.

With nearly two acres of growing area, Sound Native Plants produces about 80,000 native plants annually. A native plant is a plant that naturally occurs in an area. Plants that have been brought to an area by humans are referred to as non-native, exotic, alien,



These photos illustrate the relocation of a perennial stream into a naturally-configured channel. The channel was lined with erosion control fabric and the banks were seeded and planted with container-grown native species.

or introduced.

Restoration projects take many forms, but the goal is always to return the land to a more natural condition.

On a typical restoration project, Alexander starts by performing a thorough evaluation of the site to identify

potential problems. Later, he works with the landowners to develop site-specific planting plans.

Most projects include removing structures and sources of damage, controlling invasive weeds, restoring healthy soils, replanting native plants, and maintaining the sites until they become self-sustaining. Projects often need several years of maintenance to become fully established.

Sound Native Plants often partners with local community and environmental groups. The company's expertise is locally renowned, but also recognized world-wide.

Last year the owners were invited to South Korea to teach portions of a week-long course on urban ecological restoration, sponsored by the UN at the Seoul National University, and they'll be returning this summer to teach it again. Sound Native Plants also regularly provides local training, workshops, and lectures for public agencies, non-profit groups and consulting firms.

Recently, Sound Native Plants joined forces with the Olympia-based Capitol Land Trust to remove a road culvert and restore a naturally flowing stream that leads into a salt marsh on Puget Sound where salmon feed. Funded by a state grant, the project included converting a paved road to a walking trail, placing gravel in the stream for salmon to spawn, and planting native plants on the newly restored stream banks.

A Great Place to Work

A small company, Sound Native Plants employs 10 to 30 people depending on the season.

Sound Native Plants is a member of WFB's Retro/Safety program and the owners work hard to make sure their employees have safe working conditions and are treated well.

"Being able to provide meaningful employment is one of the greatest joys of my job," said Alexander. "We have long-term relationship with our local colleges and have lots of students that work or intern here. It's satisfying to teach and work with the students." They

have work crews in both Olympia and Vancouver, Washington.

Everyone who works for Sound Native Plants has a background in an environmental science — botany, biology, ecology to name a few. In fact, between the co-owners Alexander and Buis, and the nursery managers, they have more than 54 years of experience in native plants and environmental restoration.

Last year, Sound Native Plants was approved by Co-op America, a national nonprofit organization that screens businesses for socially and environmentally responsible business practices. In order to qualify, businesses must demonstrate "extraordinary commitments to fair treatment of their employees and workers in their supply chain, to promoting healthy communities where they do business, to preserving the environment, and to delivering quality products to their consumers."

Looking back, envisioning the future

It all started in 1991 when Alexander and Susan Buis were working for the National Park Service growing plants and doing park restoration projects. They loved what they were doing, but wanted to branch out and work for themselves, so they opened Sound Native Plants.

The business has changed a lot over the years, Alexander noted, "People are now paying more attention to environmental restoration than ever before. Washington state has developed more stringent environmental standards and requires more restoration work than ever before — especially when salmon and marine life are involved."

As for future direction, Alexander says, "we are working toward becoming USDA certified organic. We currently use organic practices and hope to be one of the only native plant nurseries in the country

A Sound Native Plants nursery employee plants Red Osier Dogwood cuttings.

that would have the organic certification."

The owners of Sound Native Plants are also focusing on other sustainable practices — such as providing designs and installation for low-impact developments.

"We're interested in promoting sustainable practices that will continue to keep our state naturally green."

It's more than just turning back the clocks of time — it's keeping up with the future too.

For more information about native plant restoration, visit www.soundnative-plants.com or call (360) 352-4122.

Native or not?

A native plant is a plant that naturally occurs in an area. Plants that have been brought to an area by humans are referred to as non-native, exotic, alien, or introduced.

Perks of Native Plants

When selecting the right plant for your property, the list of reasons to stick with native plants is long. Native plants have already evolved and adapted to the environment so they are highly resistant to disease, don't need extra watering (once established), and generally don't require fertilizers. They often cost less, can be purchased locally, and provide the ideal habitat and food source for our local birds, insects, and animals.

