

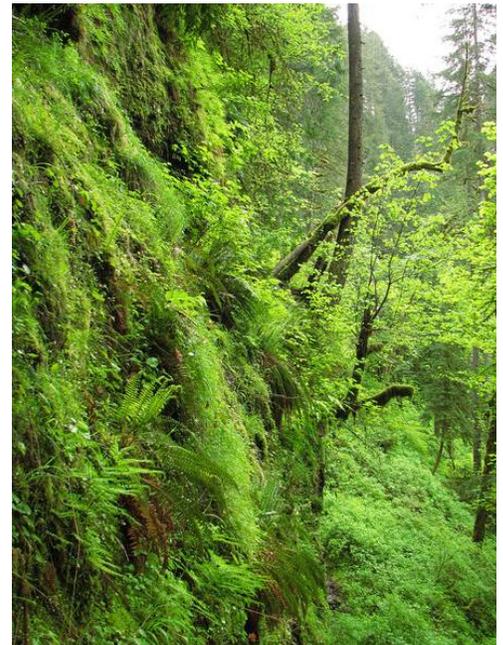
Harvesting Nontimber Forest Products in Conservation Set-Asides: An Introduction for Small Forestland Owners in the Pacific Northwest

By Eric T. Jones, Terry Anthony and Lita Buttolph Institute for Culture and Ecology

Overview

Many small forestland owners are venturing into the world of biodiversity set-asides, conservation easements, and other environmental stewardship incentive programs to earn extra income and tax breaks by managing their forests and farms for ecosystem services such as biodiversity, clean water, and fish-friendly cool streams. What is less commonly known is that many of these landowners can earn additional income selling forest products, especially nontimber forest products, harvested as a part of the management plan and agreement to maintain conservation areas on their land.

Nontimber forest products (NTFPs) broadly include all products from forests or agroforestry systems, other than industrial timber, that have value for personal or commercial use. NTFPs include hundreds of native species commonly found in the Pacific Northwest: berries and mushrooms for food; salal and ferns for the floral industry; cascara and skunk cabbage for medicinal industries; native seeds and starts for nurseries, landscapers, and restoration businesses and agencies. Chances are if it grows in your forest there is a market for it.



Conservation areas may be managed for the commercial sale of NTFPs such as the sword fern, vine maple, Oregon grape and huckleberry seen in this photo.



Chanterelle mushrooms (a) and sword fern (b) are a few examples of NTFPs with commercial value.

Appropriate Management of Conservation Areas

It's not uncommon for people to think establishing a conservation area means the area will be an unmanaged set-aside or wilderness. In fact, most conservation zones require active management. If you are a landowner establishing a formal legal arrangement such as a conservation easement with a land trust, consider crafting the agreement in a way that allows for product harvesting and sales that are compatible with the conservation goals. The agreement could also maintain flexibility so that NTFPs that may not have a strong market today could be harvested in the future if market conditions improve. For example, before the 1980s few people bought Oregon native culinary truffles. Today the market is growing rapidly and truffles are expected to become one of our most valuable forest products. While your plan must assure whomever you are making an agreement with that it will meet their conservation goals, flexibility to adapt and improve on management approaches can be a benefit for all parties. If you have an existing conservation agreement, you may find that harvesting and selling NTFPs (or parts such as stems, seeds, and fruits) from the area isn't prohibited, or is a part of your agreement that could be revised with your conservation area partners.

Appropriate stewardship of your conservation area might include thinning of overly dense stands, removal of brush, burning, planting, seed collection, chipping, composting to recycle nutrients back into the system and a host of other actions intended to improve and conserve biodiversity. Many of these actions result in marketable by-products. When landowners begin recording and researching the diversity of by-products that could be salvaged or integrated into conservation area management, they often discover a large range of commercial and non-commercial uses.



Dwarf Oregon grape root (*Mahonia nervosa*) has commercial value as a medicinal (root), food (berry), decorative (leaves) and landscaping species (whole plant).

Finding Out What You Have

How do you find out what nontimber forest products you have on your land? Unfortunately, at this time few timber cruisers, botanists, government agents, university professors, or other experts involved in forest inventories on private lands have the training to tell you what NTFPs you have, what quality the market demands, or how to manage and harvest NTFPs sustainably. Given that NTFPs bring hundreds of millions of dollars annually to the Northwest economy, we can expect more support and infrastructure to emerge to help small landowners participate. In the meantime, the good news is that if you have land in the Pacific Northwest you likely have hundreds of commercially valuable species.

You don't need an expert to start the inventory process yourself, even if you are new to forestland ownership. Walk your land, observe the ecosystem, and make a simple list of the plants you see. If you don't know common and scientific names, take a voucher specimen (i.e., sample) and a digital picture, note where samples were taken (take a GPS waypoint if you have the capability), and roughly estimate abundance and accessibility (low, medium, high). Make notes about nearby vegetation, as this will be important in making decisions about managing compatibly with the long-term goals in your plan. You can find helpful materials at www.ntfpinfo.us and other Internet sites, as well as in plant field guides. Ask your local extension agent to help you identify species or connect you with free resources. Be creative, maybe a botany or forestry class at a local college could use your land for a plant identification fieldtrip. Or maybe a local NTFP buyer would walk your land in exchange for the possibility of having a reliable private land source. Keep your data in a field notebook. If you have a computer, enter information into a spreadsheet to make it easy to email to others for sharing and feedback. If you want to get fancy, free software like MapWindow can be used to visually present your data. You might request your local Tree School or Master Woodland Manager program to offer a GIS mapping program workshop for beginners. Most people with a home computer can learn the basics in a few hours of training.



Oregon black truffles carry a high value in an emerging market.

Managing for Nontimber Forest Products

Most small private landowners will have a diversity of commercially valuable species, but not an abundance of any individual species, nor the quality the market demands. However, once you find that a native species with market value occurs on your land (or that the species could be reintroduced), start looking for management guidelines and tools to help improve abundance and quality. The free NTFP Information Exchange (www.ntfpinfo.us) website is a good place to begin. There you will find a collection of extension materials, business planning guides, how-to videos, links to online bibliographies, and a variety of other tools and

services. You should also approach the forestry, farm and soil conservation extension agents; watershed councils and land trusts with botanists in your area; and nonprofits such as the Northwest Natural Resources Group, and The Nature Conservancy. Consider a cooperative, such as the Oregon Woodland Co-op, that allows members to pool products, share resources and build a collective presence in the marketplace. Contacting and meeting so many groups takes time, but a simple email or letter stating your interest is a good way to begin filtering the ones that will likely be most receptive to helping you develop a conservation plan that includes active management for nontimber forest products.

Marketing Your Nontimber Forest Products

To learn what quality NTFP markets demand and where you might eventually sell your products, contact buyers and sellers in databases like the nontimber forest products section of the Oregon Forest Products Industry Directory (www.orforestdirectory.com). Also notice the countless raw and value-added wild products in a variety of common market places like grocery stores, nurseries, farmers markets, and online (e.g., Amazon.com and eBay).



Noble fir boughs can be regularly cut and sold to generate income while allowing the tree to grow.

Though written materials and online tools can help give you a base, ultimately if you are going to succeed at generating income from NTFP harvesting alongside your conservation program, you will have to become your own expert or develop partnerships with NTFP businesses to harvest the products from your land. You may find that taking some simple management actions can result in a sustainable yield, and for some species, greatly increase productivity. Most species react favorably to particular kinds of disturbance, so done wisely, fire, pruning, thinning, digging, and other activities can help you achieve conservation objectives while simultaneously generating marketable products. For example, under the right habitat and climatic conditions morel mushrooms can produce prolifically the year after a fire, harvesting chanterelle mushrooms can stimulate increased productivity, and Noble fir boughs can be cut and sold to market every few years and the tree will thrive. Consider drafting simple hypothetical active management scenarios that estimate NTFP product yields and values, and then share those for feedback from extension agents and other experts, especially those that are already familiar with your land.

Additional Considerations

If you are just starting out and/or have a small landholding that you want to earn some extra income from, you may find that you and your family members are a sufficient labor pool. If you have a large landholding and you want to realize more substantial income, you may need to hire a crew to help you. Some businesses that specialize in nontimber forest product harvesting may be willing to manage your system for a fee or commission, as a lease, or under some other type of mutually beneficial arrangement. You may also find that there are opportunities to work cooperatively with other landowners to share the costs and benefits of hiring professional crews. For example, the Oregon Woodland Cooperative is developing an active nontimber forest product program for their members. They are developing a strong brand name for quality Northwest products. Organizations such as the Northwest Natural Resource Group offer FSC certification, another way to add value to both timber and nontimber products.

Acknowledgements

This article was originally published in a slightly different form in Northwest Woodlands, Spring 2011, 27(2):16-19. Funding was provided by a grant from USDA National Institute for Food and Agriculture. For more information on nontimber products, including resources for small woodland owners, go to www.ntfpinfo.us.



United States
Department of
Agriculture

National Institute
of Food and
Agriculture