



FEATURE

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THE NICHE FOR ‘NANO’ NURSERIES



Native woodland expansion projects around Scotland often depend on supplies of locally grown young trees from tiny nurseries run by passionate individuals. A new project by Future Woodlands Scotland aims to better support these so-called ‘nano’ nurseries.

During the second half of 2023, and after being approached by Shireen Chambers MBE FICFor, the CEO of Future Woodlands Scotland, I was delighted to be commissioned to co-ordinate a new project aimed at facilitating assistance for small and remote tree nurseries throughout Scotland.

Future Woodlands Scotland’s remit encapsulates native woodland enhancement and expansion. It acknowledges that focused assistance is extremely important, and this is particularly significant for native woodland creation and maintaining the supply of locally sourced and grown native tree stock, which sequentially assists in delivering new woodlands which are robust from the ground upwards, so to speak.

It has become increasingly apparent that tree producers serving the UK forestry industry face expanding and emerging additional constraints, with certain issues being significantly more restrictive for small-scale producers. In this context, we informally define small-scale as ranging from small enterprises growing and selling a few thousand trees annually, to those striving to supply up to 100,000 trees. Organisational structure includes one-person growers, community and social-run projects, non-governmental organisations and charities.

Small-scale producers which do not come anywhere near to falling into the tree nursery



industry category of ‘micro’ could be described as ‘nano’ producers. Whatever the size and capacity, however, it is the availability of a sustainable supply of robust young trees which is of overarching importance.

Reaching out to the smallest producers

The supply of robust young trees is fundamental for the successful creation of new woodlands, especially for the planning and establishment of native woodlands, which can be on marginal ground with poor soils and other constraints. However, in line with current ambitious woodland creation targets and the associated policy and regulation, a sustainable and sufficient stock of native species of appropriate provenance – in the quantities demanded for new conservation planting schemes – is not always readily available via large commercial nurseries.

Phase 1 of the small-scale nursery project was therefore initiated. The first step focused

on establishing communication with representatives from small and remote Scottish tree nurseries located far and wide throughout Scotland. Contact was made with growers who hold a wealth of experience and clearly demonstrate an unrivalled passion for their work – though for most, their commitment to tree growing is far more than just ‘work’. In addition, discussions with various other organisations were also initiated, including supporting regulatory authorities and woodland conservation bodies.

The resultant constructive feedback received endorsed the positive approach embraced by those involved with small nurseries, with informal support and knowledge transfer being directed on an ad hoc and volunteer basis, for example via social media. However, a key area of concern raised at this early stage was the apparent lack of co-ordinated support for small-scale growers and producers.

The first phase of this initiative, aimed at identifying and supporting the development of tailored solutions for small and remote tree nurseries, culminated in a physical workshop organised by Future Woodlands Scotland. This workshop took place at the Trees for Life Dundreggan Rewilding Centre in Invernesshire from 20 to 22 August 2024 and was made possible with match funding awarded by the Scottish Forestry Trust.

In-person event at Dundreggan

The event brought together around 30 representatives from small nurseries and other organisations from across Scotland, including the Shetland Isles, the Hebrides, Argyll and Dumfriesshire. Discussion sessions were primarily facilitated by Andy Robinson (known as the Woodland Crofter) from the Isle of Mull and covered a wide range of topics, including efficiencies in the nurseries; sourcing materials; marketing and online profile; pricing, packaging and transport; administration, legal and compliance; training and development; and routes to further support.

There was also ample opportunity for informal discussions around the evening dinner and breakfast tables, and during the gritty brainstorming session. A brief visit to the Trees for Life nursery, located at the Rewilding Centre, provided a welcome post-lunch airing for participants, even though it was



Workshop delegates visiting the Trees for Life nursery at Dundreggan.

unseasonably wet and windy. Thank you to Nursery Manager Jill Hodge and her team for the tour.

The next task, currently in progress, is to assimilate the extensive volume of workshop flip chart sheets, sticky notes, discussion points and overall feedback, and then prepare a project report highlighting the key areas requiring attention. This will provide a robust starting point for the development of a subsequent Phase 2 delivery programme of structured training and associated support, with funding options considered and based on firm requirements with clear aims, objectives and aspirations.

In conclusion: there is no doubt that nano nurseries in remote, rural parts of Scotland

face many obstacles in their attempt to maintain efficiency and economic viability, adding pressure to deliver both high-quality and high-quantity outputs. It is imperative that these passionate producers are provided with focused support to futureproof an adequate, sustainable supply of locally-sourced native trees for woodland expansion in Scotland.

For more information on this project, contact Amy on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/amy-mitchell-8b396b27/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/amy-mitchell-8b396b27/)

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