



The ODA hosted a field day for nursery inspectors from the western U.S. to practice stripping bark from ash trees to identify emerald ash borer infestations. PHOTO BY KARA MILLS, OREGON DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

For the common good

Oregon's nursery licensing program aims to keep the entire industry healthy

BY JON BELL

It happened on June 30, 2022. Dominic Maze, an invasive species biologist for the city of Portland, had been sitting in a middle school parking lot in Forest Grove waiting to pick his kids up from a summer camp when he spotted a cluster of sickly ash trees.

Looking more closely, Maze noticed unique holes in the trees. Holes shaped like the letter D. Holes that were the tell-tale sign of a dreaded pest that had until then yet to show its face in Oregon or anywhere on the West Coast: the emerald ash borer.

An exotic beetle native to Asia, EAB has been known to devastate ash trees in no time. Between its discovery in Michigan in 2002 and the end of 2022, it was estimated to have killed more than 100 million trees in the eastern U.S.

So when it showed up in Oregon two years ago, the alarm bells went off. The Oregon Department of Agriculture adopted an EAB permanent quarantine limiting the movement of ash, white fringe and olive tree materials in all of Washington County. ODA, Oregon State University and the Oregon Department of Forestry have also been working to control the spread of EAB, removing and destroying infested trees to reduce the number of adult ash borers.

Another arrow in the quiver came in June in the form of \$125,000 that the ODA will use to pay for EAB trapping in Washington County. And that money came from nurseries in Oregon and the fees they contribute as part of the ODA's nursery licensing program and an associated emergency fund set up for just this

kind of threat.

"The emergency fund is paid for by nurseries, and we just triggered that for emerald ash borers so we can get more assets on the ground to help ODA and ODF control this," said Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, whose board votes to approve any use of the emergency fund. "It's not a complete solution, but it will help slow it down."

The emergency fund is just one component of the ODA's nursery licensing program. Other pieces aim to keep nursery plants healthy, whether they're being grown here and shipped out of state or brought in from elsewhere.

The program also has a research component that funds projects aimed at helping Oregon's nursery industry long-term — a key goal considering that, >>

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with more than \$1.2 billion in sales in 2022, the nursery and greenhouse industry is the leading agricultural commodity in the state.

“We are not the plant police,” said Kara Mills, program lead for the ODA’s Nursery and Christmas Tree Program. “We are plant and nursery advocates first and foremost. We are here to help keep Oregon’s plants healthy and support a robust industry.”

From the ground up

Not everyone who sells plants in Oregon needs a license through the nursery licensing program — but most do. According to Mills, licenses are required for anyone selling \$250 worth of nursery stock per year. Retailers who buy \$250 or more in nursery stock also need a license.

Nursery stock only includes living plants that are intended to continue living

after a customer buys them. For example, a tomato and tomato seeds are not considered nursery stock, but a tomato starter plant is; similarly, cut flowers, like tulips, are not nursery stock, but tulip bulbs are. Tree cuttings for propagation are nursery stock, while tree cuttings for decoration are not.

“I think that’s one of the biggest points of confusion,” Mills said, “is what qualifies as nursery stock and how that determines what a nursery is.”

Based on the licensing requirements, quite a few entities need to have nursery licenses, including stores like Grocery Outlet, Costco, Home Depot, Lowe’s and Fred Meyer. Individuals who sell at farmers’ markets, farm stands, online sites like Etsy and elsewhere are also required to have a license once they hit the \$250 annual sales threshold.

Fees for licenses vary based on a nurs-



Cara Still (right), Mia Johnson (center), and Keen Maher make interspecific crosses on western redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*) trees that were mutated and selected for single trunk, upright form rather than the shrubby habit typical of the species. The licensing program also includes the research assessment, which helps fund research projects in agriculture aimed at benefiting the entire nursery industry. PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

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Claire Kepner prepares root tips for cytological observation to confirm chromosome numbers.
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ery's gross annual sales. The ODA has a fee calculator on its website that makes it fairly straightforward to calculate how much a nursery's license will cost. A nursery that has up to \$20,000 in gross sales would pay \$148 for its license plus a small assessment for every amount sold above that \$20,000 mark. It would also pay a \$10 research assessment fee, which goes to fund nursery- and plant-related research projects.

A larger nursery with \$5 million in sales would pay \$7,035 for a license, along with an assessment for amounts above that, and a research fee of \$1,000; a license for a nursery with \$11 million in sales would cost \$10,695, plus an assessment above that, and a research fee of \$2,200.

According to data from ODA, as of June 2024, there were 2,881 nursery license holders in Oregon — retailers, greenhouse growers and stock growers — with a sum value (sales or purchases of nursery stock) of \$1.4 billion. Just over 1,500 of those nurseries pay the minimum licensing fee, illustrating that the majority of nurseries in Oregon are on the smaller side.

Money for something

Funds raised through the nursery licensing program help fund a range of different services designed to support — and protect — Oregon's nursery industry. For starters, ODA has 10 nursery inspec-

tors who cover various territories across the state, mostly concentrated in the Willamette Valley.

The inspectors help track which plants are coming into or going out of Oregon to make sure nurseries are following proper state and federal quarantine requirements and filing the correct paperwork.

"They're really tasked with helping to keep nursery plants healthy and keeping an eye out for diseases and insects that can potentially come in," Mills said.

The inspectors also frequently take samples of plants coming into Oregon to make sure they're not bringing anything harmful with them. While other states have their own quarantine requirements, and while plants may appear healthy when they set out on their voyage to Oregon, shipping conditions can sometimes be fertile ground for stowaway pests or diseases, such as *phytophthora ramorum*, the pathogen that causes sudden oak death.

If plants arrive in Oregon and fail to pass muster, they will be rejected and returned to their state of origin to be destroyed.

In addition to monitoring plants coming and going from Oregon, the ODA's inspectors also work closely with Oregon nurseries who may be experiencing an outbreak of a disease or pest. In that case, inspectors will help nurseries confirm the outbreak, including identifying insects >>

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in an ODA lab, as well as collaborate on a plan to eradicate or control it so that it doesn't spread to other nurseries or areas of the state.

"If a nursery has an outbreak, we are here with resources to help," Mills said. "If there's an outbreak at one nursery, we want to help out so that we're not only protecting that one nursery, but the entire industry in Oregon."

She added that it's important for nurseries in Oregon to sign up for alerts and notifications from the nursery licensing program to stay informed about any outbreaks that may rear their heads.

"They might not think that a certain disease or pest would affect them," Mills said, "but it's important for them to know and to be certain about it. We can always help with that."

Above and beyond

On top of supporting nurseries when

it comes to outbreaks, inspections, quarantines and other matters, the nursery licensing program serves a few additional purposes for Oregon nurseries. First is the emergency fund, which comes from a portion of the license fees. The fund usually stands at \$250,000. If it's tapped into, as it was in June to help tackle EAB, it gets replenished through a one-year recovery surcharge on license holders.

The licensing program also includes the research assessment, which helps fund research projects in agriculture aimed at benefiting the entire nursery industry.

"The overall goal with that research funding is to try to plan ahead and keep Oregon safe from new pests, to develop plants that are resistant to pests and just to protect the industry," Mills said.

Current projects funded in part through the nursery license program in 2023 include research at Oregon State University on everything from boxwood

blight and thrips control to new disease-resistant nursery plants and using pulse electricity as a fumigant alternative in nursery seedling beds.

"We are grateful for every single dollar we have received as a result of the license assessment," said Ryan Contreras, professor and associate head of Oregon State University's Department of Horticulture, some of whose research is being funded by the licensing program. "It's cliché, but it's the whole rising tides floats all boats idea. This funding helps us with our research, but it also encourages collaboration between us and our nursery partners. That's a really important part of it."

Stone, with OAN, said such collaboration is also evident between the association, its members and the ODA, in part through the nursery licensing program. While some states might find nurseries butting heads with their regulatory counterparts or government being heavy-handed in its approach, he said the ODA and the OAN have developed a relationship of support and assistance that's envied across the country.

"The relationship between the association and ODA is as important as any relationship between two entities can be," Stone said. "ODA is both a regulator and a huge advocate. Our relationship with them has always been one of how do we make the best system possible."

Ultimately, the arrangement protects Oregon growers by addressing research and pest issues and ultimately protecting Oregon's access to marketplaces nationwide. "Ultimately we support the licensing program and fees because they are put to good use," Stone said. "We're committed to defending the proper use of the fees going forward." ☺

Jon Bell is an Oregon freelance journalist who writes about everything from Mt. Hood and craft beer to real estate and the great outdoors. His website is JBellInk.com.

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