



ROUNDTABLE: SUCCESSFUL CONTRACT GROWING PARTNERSHIPS

Photos courtesy of Bold Spring Nursery

The Suburban Tree Consortium (STC) of Illinois West Central Municipal Conference was created in 1985 by a group of municipalities seeking to improve the quality and selection of parkway trees in the Chicago area. Prior to 1985, low-bid requirements resulted in poor quality trees, high mortality, and little continuity and consistency with area nurseries.

With the help of the West Central Municipal Conference, municipalities lobbied to change state statute, so that today, Illinois State law allows municipalities to enter into long-term contractual relationships with quality growers. The four Chicago-area nurseries that serve the STC are Wilson Nurseries, Beaver Creek Nursery, Hinsdale Nurseries, and Possibility Place Nursery.

There are 33 member communities participating in the STC, all in the Chicago metropolitan area. Collective purchasing by municipalities allows for economies of scale, promotes better relationships with area nurseries, and encourages municipalities to communicate with one another. In all, the consortium buys over 5500 trees a year.

In this Roundtable, we hear from the President of the STC. We also read a Canadian perspective on a successful contract growing partnership. Finally, we read a grower's perspective from Bold Spring Nursery.

Kerstin von der Heide Village Forester, Downers Grove & President, Suburban Tree Consortium for the Illinois West Central Municipal Conference

Downers Grove (population 48,000) started participating in the consortium in 1987. Since '99, when the consortium added three nurseries to its roster, we've purchased all of our trees through the program.

We contract with the nurseries on a five-year cycle but have the option of buying additional trees at the last minute, based on availability. Every year the nurseries supply us with a price and availability list. We order for five years out, and we tend to order conservatively, since municipal budgets can fluctuate unpredictably.

We encourage member communities to advance-order fewer trees than they'll need and leave the remainder to the last minute, to anticipate budget cutbacks or to accommodate unique site conditions that may require specific trees. For example, if I need a hundred trees, I'll order 60 of them five years in advance and 40 closer to planting time. As planting time approaches, I will know the planting site conditions and can then increase my order of tree species that will work in those sites.

The risk, of course, is that the trees you want may not be available. Trees that are in more demand here—such as ginkgoes, pears, and oaks—should be advance ordered. More common trees
continued on page 22...



Thuja occidentalis 'Green Giant' at the nursery

such as Freeman maple, honeylocust, and linden are generally always going to be available.

When we place our five-year order, we can request that the nursery grow certain trees, and they will entertain the request. Also, sometimes what's on the availability list isn't all they offer—they may have small quantities of species that they can part with. Here in Downers Grove, we use small quantities of catalpa and hybrid elms that other municipalities may not.

The municipalities are all different in terms of planting. Some cities have their own employees plant the trees. In Downers Grove, we contract out the tree planting, from picking up trees at the nurseries to installing them in the parkways. It just makes more sense for us in terms of our budget. Generally, the contractor plants 170 trees for us in the spring and 130 in the fall, all B&B. I tag the trees in advance at the nursery. We've rarely had problems with tree quality, but when we do, the nurseries have been good about exchanging material.

The challenges are few, but municipal budget cutbacks can be one. Sometimes a community has to cut back their order quite a bit, but that's where other municipalities can come in and pick up the slack so we don't leave the nursery in the lurch. Another challenge is that purchasing processes vary among our communities. So we have to be vigilant about getting the bills turned around quickly. As our membership increases, the billing paperwork gets more complex.

Aside from these small hurdles, the program is working really well. In Downers Grove, we even offer residents the chance to choose from different trees for the tree lawns adjacent to their properties.

Bruce Hay
Manager of Parks Maintenance and Operations
Brampton, Ontario

Brampton (NW of Toronto; population 412,000) is the third-fastest-growing city in Canada. The genesis of our contract growing arrangement was our inability to obtain guaranteed, consistent, quality nursery stock during the 1990s for planting along roadways or in front of peoples' homes. Prices would fluctuate wildly, and if there was a critical event such as the ice storm in 1998, it was very difficult to get good caliper stock, as it was being used for replanting efforts in eastern Ontario.

In addition, as a municipality, our budget was not getting approved until sometimes March or April. We did not have the lead time



Bold Spring Nursery contract-grows baldcypress trees (*Taxodium distichum*) "limbed up" for clearance in urban settings.

to get the tender out and attract bids that contained all the plant material we needed—or we would have to break up the order based on best price for different groupings of trees. This led to all kinds of substitution of tree varieties and dealing with several different nurseries, which caused all kinds of logistical problems.

Based on our research, we knew that it would be too costly for the City of Brampton to establish and maintain its own nursery. Despite having the land base, we are not professional growers.

An RFP for a ten-year valley reforestation project was produced and sent to three major nurseries in close proximity to Brampton. The nurseries were selected based on their reputation for growing quality plant material in large quantities. Our annual requirement for ten years was 500 B&B trees of 60 mm (2.3 inch) caliper for planting along streetscapes, 2500

continued on page 24...

two-gallon potted whips, and 30,000 potted shrubs. We sought a supplier whose prices would remain constant, allowing only for average fluctuations in the nursery industry and normal inflation.

Sheridan Nurseries, a well-known Ontario nursery with over 90 years in business, was the successful bidder. Sheridan staff was as excited as city staff about this unique, long-term method of supplying plant material. Once the contract was awarded, Brampton staff met with Sheridan's president, William (Bill) Stensson, and Manuel Sobrinho, vice-president of nursery operations, to review the entire scope of the project, including site inspection and plant material delivery schedule.

We placed the first plant order in spring 2002 for delivery of the whips and shrubs in spring 2003. The majority of caliper trees were available in spring 2004. After three successful seasons of the program, the City of Brampton continues to enjoy a great spirit of cooperation with the staff at Sheridan Nurseries.

Brampton's Secrets to Success:

- *Flexibility in nursery stock varieties and quantities (Sheridan staff is very flexible in this regard). As needs change, varieties specified within the contract may be required to change. Most larger growing operations will not find this to be a concern, but smaller growing operations may not be able to absorb this shift in demand. Flexibility should be spelled out in the contract and discussed prior to entering into a long-term agreement.*
- *Direct lines of communication that ensure that both parties are operating within both the confines and the spirit of the agreement. Pre- and post-season meetings assist in communicating both the negative and positive aspects of the business relationship.*
- *A relationship based on prompt service delivery, prompt and accurate invoicing, and prompt payment for services.*
- *Contracts that are established to run for a minimum of five years and that re-let three years prior to the active contract's conclusion.*
- *Knowledge of what is available through normal purchasing practices and concentration on those varieties that are perennially difficult to procure.*



Contract growing partnerships may allow municipalities to access better quality plant material or difficult-to-find selections. Pictured: *Acer rubrum* 'October Glory'

**Hillary Barber
Marketing Director,
Bold Spring Nursery, Inc.
Monroe, GA**

Bold Spring Nursery specializes in specimen-quality, B&B trees and shrubs. We provide high-quality urban trees that are typical of the species and grown using established arboricultural practices; that is, they have six- to seven-foot trunk clearance, trained central leaders, permanent branches, no included bark, the root flare at soil level, and they are matched specimens.

When we provide contract-grown trees, it is often because big specialty trees are required. When we contract-grow, it is not a situation where we are asked to grow x number of a tree we don't already grow. Rather, we enter into a contractual relationship when some of the trees that we already grow are required to be grown in a unique manner. Contract growing is a venture that

is inspired by ambitious ideas and plans. Sadly, these ideas and plans sometimes go awry and will be explained from the nursery's perspective later.

The "big idea" arises when a unique design or situational need presents itself. The designer, landscape architect, city planner, or city arborist has unique needs for a unique location and approaches a B&B nursery to have plants grown to their specifications. The requirements of the urban forest are the directing force of these contract-grown, specialty trees. Some project examples:

- *Nine-inch-caliper trees for a pleached hedge. The trees were so large they provided an instant aerial hedge.*
- *Fifteen-foot-clear trunks to keep the limbs clear of signage. The trees were pruned and maintained in the nursery from a young age so that the trunks were clean of pruning wounds and so that the lowest limbs are well above the signage.*
- *Trees that are typically grown full to the ground, such as Taxodium and Metasequoia, grown with six- to seven-foot-clear trunks, to accommodate pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Again, training was started when the trees were young so that wounding was minimized.*
- *Trees typically grown as multi-stemmed subjects, such as Lagerstroemia species, Ilex x attenuata*

'Nellie R. Stevens', Ilex x attenuata 'Fosteri', Ilex opaca, and Ilex cornuta cultivars, grown as single-stem standards. This opens up new design uses in gardens and urban areas.

The plan is put into action by the nursery. Contracts are signed. Trees are set aside and taken off inventory. Special equipment is purchased or built. Schedules are established for special pruning and cultivation. The trees are cared for long term; they are held onto and not sold to others. Extras are grown and maintained as replacements in case of mishap at any stage of the project (or even after they are placed in the landscape). Land, time, equipment, labor, and thought are consumed by the special project. These expenditures are worth it. The challenge, the novelty, the satisfaction of a project completed, and the joy of seeing the trees in the finished landscape confirming the vision of the "big idea" make the effort rewarding.

Because these are long-term projects, time passes between the inception of the idea and the completion of growing the trees. This gives time for clients to change their minds. This seems to be the downside of these special projects. Trees go out of style, someone reads a bad report about the species of trees they are having contract grown, building plans change and the unique trees are no longer needed, budgets run dry, and folks just generally change their minds.

Because clients are prone to changing their minds, contracts and non-refundable deposits are often required by the nursery. The deposit is required because the contract-grown trees are often so unique that it is difficult or impossible to sell them to another customer. Also, if the client no longer wants the trees, the trees then reenter inventory and throw the nursery's budgets off kilter. These are problems that clients often don't perceive, and they find it very difficult to accept the nonrefundable deposit criterion. In an effort to not destroy the relationship with the customer, the nursery often refunds the deposit.

Refunded deposits and unique, hard-to-sell trees added back into inventory are but small losses. If the deal is broken those issues are the least of the nursery's concerns. The lamentable fact is that relationships are what suffer the most. The nursery personnel are hurt or frustrated that they have been left with trees they can't sell, and the former client is just that: a former client. Clients are sometimes embarrassed by their decisions and may never again do day-to-day business with the nursery, let alone enter into another contract growing agreement.

What a nursery like Bold Spring needs to see is commitment and follow-through by the client. That said, customers have their own stresses and pressures in the arrangement, and the above presentation should be recognized as being solely from a nursery's perspective. The relationship is fun, satisfying, and fruitful for both parties when both follow through with their particular agreements. May more big ideas flow, more promises be kept, and more trees be planted! 🌿