



What tree growers need from you

By Gwilym Griffiths, December 10th 2021

Tree supply is a key component to any planting program, and understanding what growers need is essential to deliver successful tree planting programs. There are currently many planting initiatives and programs out there and securing the tree stock you need can be problematic. It requires good planning, communication and most importantly – time.



Growing trees can be a complicated process as there are many moving pieces and variables. Trees are a living product that have a shelf life, they are not static like a pallet of bricks which can sit as inventory for as long as needed. Growing trees requires careful management to ensure they meet the industry's needs. This can be described as the 'Grower's Jigsaw Puzzle', with numerous pieces needed to fit together to ensure successful tree supply can be achieved;

So, what do growers need from you to ensure you get the tree stock you want, when you need it. This can be simplified into two simple questions:

1. WHAT DO YOU WANT?
2. WHEN DO YOU WANT IT?

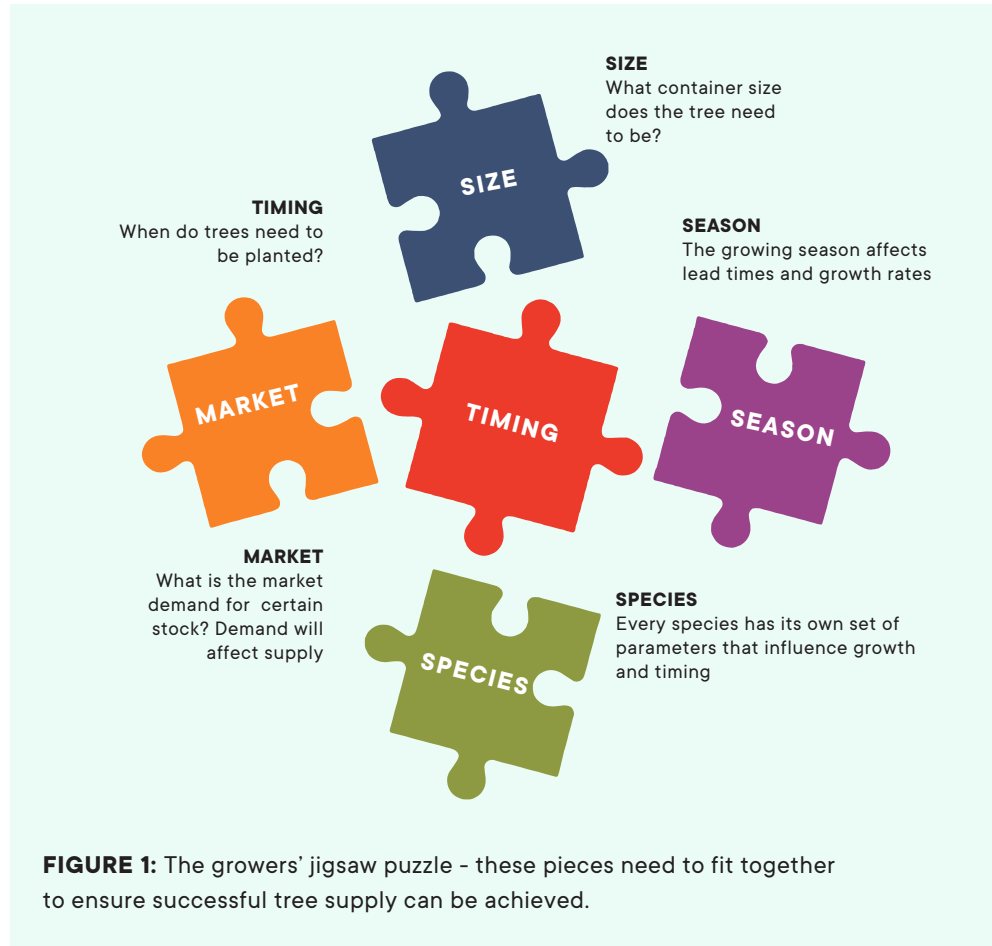


FIGURE 1: The growers' jigsaw puzzle - these pieces need to fit together to ensure successful tree supply can be achieved.

1. WHAT DO YOU WANT?

There are several elements to this question:

SPECIES

– what species of trees are you looking for? Species availability is often dependent on your timeframe. Growers can produce almost any species you want if you give them enough time to grow it. What growers produce vs what consumers want is often referred to as the 'chicken and egg syndrome' – who decides which species are grown, the market or the grower? The answer is both.

Large commercial growers look at what the market is demanding and adapt their stock lines to suit. This requires careful planning and use of data such as past sales history, analysis of the plant schedules they receive, predicting trends and staying in touch with the industry.

They also generally carry regular lines of certain species that they know are in demand and perform well.

The more specialty growers tend stick to species they know are proven to perform and offer a range of trees to suit different scenarios and 'design niches' i.e. trees suitable for streets, parks, narrow verges, etc.

When planning your planting program, you should build flexibility into your species selection to allow for improved outcomes. The species itself is often not the primary concern, selecting the right tree for the right location is. Speak to the grower before you develop your planting list to see what they have available.

QUANTITY AND CONTAINER SIZE

– How many trees do you need and at what sizes? Depending on your lead times you may need to take what is available unless you allow enough time for the desired container size to be grown to order. Quantity and container size can be highly impacted by timing – if you allow enough time in your project you will generally be able to get what you need, the less time allowed in the program the more you will be at the whim of whatever is available in the nursery at that time.



FIGURE 2: Getting the container size you want can be highly impacted by timing. (Image credit: G.Griffiths)

QUALITY

– What is your specification for quality? You will need to tell the grower what you want in terms of the quality of your trees. This includes specifying if you want trees grown to AS2303 *Tree stock for landscape use* (which of course you do) but also specifying elements such as clear stem, trunk clearance, root ball depth and any other site-specific requirements you may need. Buying good quality stock is essential for the success of your planting programs. Trees are a structural asset that require structural integrity to perform. This integrity starts in the nursery and if the quality isn't right when planted, it will never be right.

Specify the standard – there is no need to go off and develop your own quality specification, this is what the standard is for.

“You either plant trees that have been grown to AS2303 or you don't plant at all.”

Ross Clark

Timing can affect the quality of the stock you are receiving. Growing good quality trees takes time and expectations need to be stated up front. If you have left purchasing your trees to the last minute you are more likely to have to accept lesser quality trees. Unfortunately, not all growers apply the standard in the same way and so have varying levels of stock quality. If you are going through a large wholesaler who sources stock from throughout the country, they may have to purchase trees from growers with lower quality standards to fulfill your order – this is especially the case with last minute orders where the wholesaler doesn't have the stock you need in their own nursery.

Use a grower you trust, and preferably visit them to see how they implement quality standards. If your project requires certification of quality against the standard, tell the grower this at the time of ordering so they can ensure the correct auditing and processes are followed. Asking for certification at the end if you haven't specified it up front will lead to issues. You may also arrange an independent audit of the trees to ensure they meet the standard before you accept them for your project. Again this needs to be stated up front and allowed for in the program.



FIGURE 3: Tim Carroll from Andreasens Green discussing the importance of stock quality. (Image credit: G.Griffiths)

It is not good enough to simply specify the standard without checking compliance with it. The 'Tree Stock Standard Project', a collaboration between Hort Innovation, Nursery and Garden Industry Australia and Western Sydney University, developed a simple to follow non-destructive method of assessing tree stock against the standard. It considers a 'Preferred Percentile Range' for size index values that accounts for stem diameter, height and container size. This assessment method can be found here: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1484282/HIE-card-A5.pdf

In some cases, selective destructive testing may be required to fully assess the quality of the tree's root system. Again, this needs to be stated up front and allowed for in the program as it will require additional trees to be grown.



FIGURE 4: Destructive testing can sometimes be the only way to check root quality (Image credit: G.Griffiths)

2. WHEN DO YOU WANT IT?

There are less elements to this question, it is however no less important. 'When do you want it' could almost be considered the most important question from a grower's point of view. Without a clearly defined timeline or insufficient lead time, many of the 'what do you want' factors such as quality, size and species can all be impacted. Lead time is everything when it comes to getting the trees you want at the quality you expect.

BEST PRACTICE – TREE SUPPLY CONTRACTS

Trees take time to grow and it is rare to find a grower that will have exactly what you want just sitting in the yard, especially for large planting projects. Best practice is to establish a 'forward growing contract', 'tree supply contract' or 'supply agreement' well in advance of when you need the trees.

Planning is key and locking in your plant supply should be one of the first steps in the process. Forward growing contracts ensure that you can get the exact tree species you want, at the quality you specify and at the exact time you need them.

It is also important to ensure that your lists are as complete and final as possible, as changes down the line can lead to additional costs and delays, especially with larger stock.

Get the site right. It is important to have assessed your planting site during your planning phase of the program. The location should not go on the planting list unless you know it can be planted in that location. Ordering trees based on an unverified list can cause headaches for both the grower and yourself with order cancellations, surplus stock and holding fees. Generally, a forward supply contract or supply agreement should include the following:

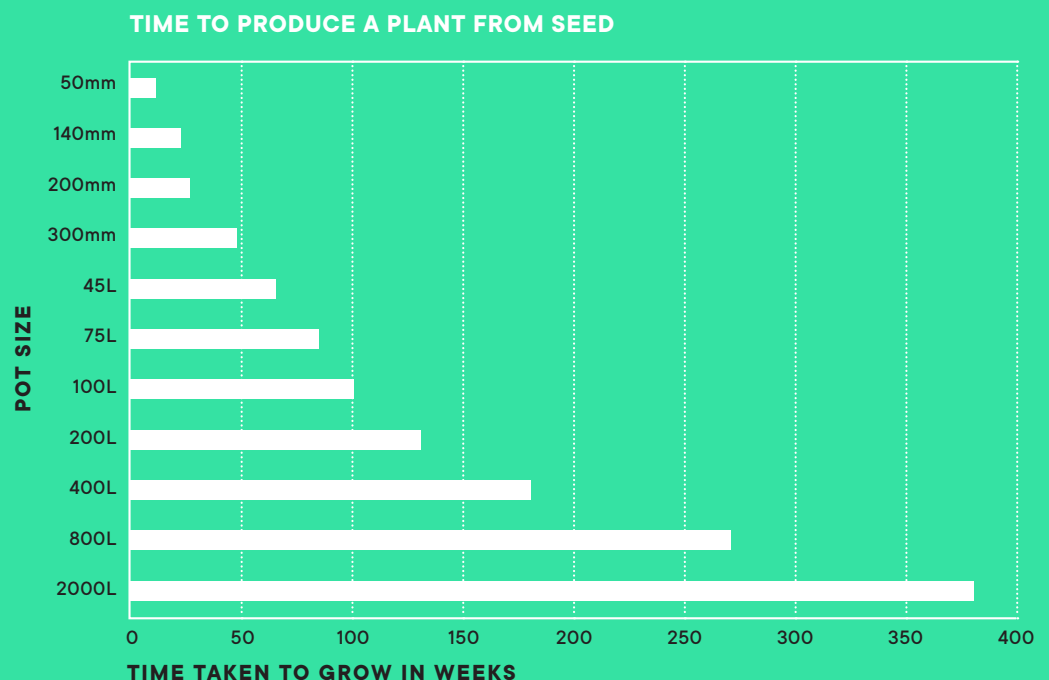
- Species and quantities (schedule)
- Container sizes
- Quality specifications and details of auditing (including hold points if required)
- Timeframe for delivery (within 2-3 months window) needs to be as specific as possible
- Details of any staged delivery requirements (for large planting programs that extend over several months)
- Agreement on \$\$ rates for holding or potting up if delays occur.

One way to achieve this forward procurement is to separate the supply and install parts of your contracts. This way you can arrange your supply well in advance of going to tender for the install part of the contract. You can novate the supply portion into the installation contract if required or simply specify that supply is by the client and allowances should be made in the quote for coordination of tree delivery.

Structure the contract to suit tree quality. Quite often it is easiest to specify one tree supplier to provide all your trees, but this may come at the cost of quality. Consider separating your tree supply to suit more specialty growers who can provide the quality of trees you require.

It is important to consider the length of time it takes to grow trees to a certain container size, for example; to grow a tree from seed to 45L can take 12 to 18 months. There are several variables such as species and climate, however as a guide, the table below outlines the length of time required to growth trees to certain container sizes;

FIGURE 5: The approximate time to produce a tree to different container sizes – based on fast growing species (Image credit – Andreasens Green)



WHEN BEST PRACTICE ISN'T POSSIBLE

It can be difficult to achieve forward procurement contracts for tree growing and sometimes circumstances just don't allow for it to happen. If this is the case the greater amount of lead time you can provide, the better.

“There is limited stock available in the market at any given time and it often comes down to a first in best dressed.”

Tim Carroll Andreasens Green

It is quite common for contracts for tree planting projects to go out to tender as supply and install. Unless there are significant lead times built into the specification to allow for contract growing, the contractor will generally have to source plants within a very tight timeframe. If you cannot afford a long lead time you should be prepared to manage the following issues:

- You are more likely to have to accept poorer quality stock. Last minute orders are often sourced from other growers with lesser quality control. Availability becomes the priority rather than quality.
- Species substitutions are likely to occur. This is fine if you have built in the flexibility for this in your contracts.
- The container size you are looking for may not be available, which could then affect your installation rates and cause issues with other parts of your contract.
- Certain stock may not be available at the time you need it and this may cause delays to your planting program.

COMMUNICATION

Central to all elements of procuring trees is good communication. The more you can keep the growers in the loop with any changes to project timelines or design, the better. You may be able to avoid holding and potting up fees if you communicate these changes early enough. If they are regular stock lines for these growers they will generally be able to absorb the changes.

Timing is critical and understanding that trees are 'living products' that have a limited shelf life, they are not a pallet of bricks that have an indefinite shelf life, is very important. If there are time delays, which inevitably there often are, these delays need to be communicated effectively to all stakeholders within the project. If stock needs to be potted up there will need to be allowances made for additional costs and potential time delays while this stock grows into the next size category. In some cases, especially with lengthy delays, holding or potting up won't be an option and stock may need to be sourced from another supplier or smaller container size batches of trees bought forward to fulfil your order. The grower's preference is to mitigate as much potting up/ holding as possible - they prefer to turn stock over.

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