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Project FNE 95-102

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**Development of a Woodlands Growing Method  
for New England Native Wildflower and Medicinal Plants**

**Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program  
Producer Grant Interim Report  
June 1997**

**1. Restate the goals of your project.**

I am building growing beds in a thinned woodland area, and growing medicinal herbs and woodlands wildflowers native to New England. This method should minimize the need for irrigation and shade while also minimizing pest damage. I will propagate plants from seed, cuttings, and divisions. Many of the plants I grow are stressed in the wild from overharvesting, and my goal is to provide a sustainable source for these plants.

**2. Update the information on your farm since you received a producer grant. Include acres farmed, crops/livestock.**

We have thinned another small area of woodland and added several new plantings, including blue bead lily and may apple. I have installed a heated greenhouse and cleared and built growing beds for commercial cultivation of cut flowers and medicinal and culinary herb plants (not necessarily native). I am currently supplying flowers to two retail markets, the local nursing home and am selling them and herb plants at two local farmers markets. I am selling a few of the native plants by special request at the markets. We are growing meat chickens with another family for our own use.

**3. Who were your cooperators and what were their roles in the project?**

Dave Bacon of Canterbury Farm helped with his equipment for the clearing and removing substantial tree roots and rocks, and path building. Roy Bryan has volunteered a tremendous amount of time clearing, digging and planting. J & R Trees has done much of the tree cutting work. Lauren Henning volunteered several days of digging.

**4. Tell us what you actually did in your project and how it was done.**

I thinned between 2 - 2-1/2 acres of forest land so that the trees left standing were a mix of small saplings and mature older trees. Maple, birch and beech are the predominant trees, with some hemlock and pine. Most trees were left with about 20' in between them, although this varies for areas to be either shadier or sunnier, depending on plant requirements. There is a small stream nearby which provided necessary water for small transplants.

I dug beds of varying size in which to establish "mother" herb plants. These beds range from 4' x 15' to the smallest at about 3' x 5'. The beds accommodate themselves to any major rocks in the area. They were dug approximately 6" deep, and then forked another 8 or so inches. Major roots were removed, then the top soil was strained to remove remaining fern runners, etc. Bone meal, greensand and rock phosphate were added. I did not add manure or other organic matter in order to lessen the risk of introducing weed species. I took plants soil preferences into consideration when planning beds: plants liking sandy, damp soil went near the stream; plants liking drier soils went further upslope; sunlight preferences were also considered.

One kind of plant went into each bed. The following varieties were planted: goldenseal, ginseng, blue cohosh, bloodroot, jack in the pulpit, foamflower, partridge berry, wild ginger, maidenhair fern, red trillium, may apple, bluebead lily and hepatica. These plants were watered as necessary as the summer became progressively drier. In the fall I collected seed (from local wild populations) and planted blue cohosh and jack in the pulpit. I left the goldenseal and bloodroot to self sow.

This past year I have added another 36 goldenseal plants, restarted about 42 ginseng plants, added a may apple bed, and blue bead lily, tiarella cordifolia and twin flower beds. The last three are not so much for medicinal uses as for wildflowers.

**5. What were your findings and accomplishments? Did you have unexpected results? If so what were they.**

The first ginseng planting was all lost. The jack in the pulpit came from seed and the new plants are growing well. The transplanted jacks appear to have a fertilizer imbalance; I will test the soil nearby where they grow wild, and the soil, which is quite sandy, where I put them. The partridgeberry is a difficult transplant; I think it probably best to move entire clumps with soil intact. Much of it I moved when it was in the way of the driveway, but did not take soil along. The blue cohosh seems to be thriving, although it has not germinated from the seed I planted last year.. Some of my original goldenseal (which predates the project) is naturalizing; some of the project's goldenseal now has three stalks. It appears that there are baby goldenseal plants in the bed from last year's seed. The wild ginger has also self seeded. The goldenseal is probably the most likely plant for me to grow commercially to harvest its roots to sell to the medicinal market. I am happy with how happy it seems to be.

**6. Is there any specific site information relevant to your project or the results?**

See above.

**7. What were your economic findings (if relevant to your project).**

I think that in the long run (in some species cases, up to 7 - 12 years) there is the potential that this project will be a practical and economic way to grow plants to sell. In the short term, I am hoping that a few plants can be sold. The economic cost of building the beds is not great; it is primarily a cost of labor time. Clearing the forest is also primarily a one-time labor cost; however sapling sprouts will need to be cut back for several years. Because goldenseal grows well here and because it is so popular, I believe that it could be economically practical to grow commercially for the root. I have sold a few plants to individuals at market who are using them in their wooded gardens. I think this is a nice way to reintroduce some species to Berkshire County areas where there may have once been plant populations.

**8. Have the results from your project generated new ideas about what is needed to solve the problem you were working on? What would be the next step?**

I found that grass came into the beds, although there is very little in the woods around them. It has been weeded. I have put better leaf mulch on the soil around the new plants. I believe that I removed too much of the rough organic matter from the jack in the pulpit bed; in the future I'll be less obsessive about getting out roots. I recently listened to a tape of a conference workshop by a wild plants researcher at the University of North Carolina. She indicated that goldenseal and ginseng used to be grown in large intensely planted areas and were prone to diseases which she expects will return. This reinforces my idea of planting small, scattered beds. She also said that goldenseal can't be grown after goldenseal (if you are harvesting for the roots); I am hoping that if I grow in scattered beds and do not plant to intensively this will not become a problem.

**9. Will you continue to use the practice you investigated? Why or why not?**

Yes, although it does seem to be a slow going project; I do not plan to sell many plants until there are more of them, although I will continue selling a few plants and to build more of these beds for the future. The demands of cut flowers and herbs, which I sell at the local farmers market and which provide much of my income, seem to continually take first priority

**10. What do you tell other producers about your project and the results?**

**11. Explain what you did in your outreach program? Please send a copy of any articles written about your project.**

There is a small group of people here interested in native plants who have been in contact with United Plant Savers. They are talking about becoming involved with my project. I have had several young people from the Berkshires who I have met at market come to learn the plants and to help work in the growing beds. Last year I offered a workshop through Naomi's Herbs, a store in Lenox. She is not doing any workshops this summer. I have led several walks through the area planted, showing visitors how to recognize these plants.

**12. Please include 2-3 slides or photographs of your project.**

In a later mail; I want to finally get this into the mail.