

Nursery grows from tiny acorns

By **DIANNA TROYER**
For the Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — Envisioning a stunning oak tree in his yard, Dave Luker stopped by a greenhouse in Pocatello decades ago and was told oak trees cannot grow in southeastern Idaho.

“I grew up in Filer, and oak trees are everywhere because settlers from Missouri planted them,” Luker says.

That incident in 1983 compelled Luker to develop oak hybrids at his home nursery.

Working as a landscaper at a local hospital and later at nurseries, he planted oak trees throughout Pocatello that are thriving today.

After wild turkeys were introduced to the region, he partnered with conservationists to plant oak trees for the birds.

Since opening his business, WestWood Growers Conservation Nursery, Luker, 57, has become the only wholesale or retail nursery in Idaho offering more than 60 varieties of oak trees. He sells about 5,000 a year.

He is not only an expert at growing oak trees, but other deciduous hardwoods.

“I did a mission for my church in Ohio and saw an amazing variety of trees. Other hardwoods that do well here are buckeye, beech, yellowwood, red-flowering chestnut and Turkish hazel.

To stimulate seedling growth, Luker plants acorns and other trees in reusable plastic containers with perforated holes that encourage lateral root growth.

He also uses mycorrhizal fungi in a liquid to stimulate nutrient absorption in a tree.

“To plant a tree, ideally you should colonize the planting site with wood chips for up to a year. You can put down cardboard and pour a free 25-gallon pot of chips

on it that we have here. When you plant a tree in a well prepared site like that, it will really take off.”

Besides providing oak trees of all sizes to landscape companies and consumers, Luker gathers 5 tons of acorns from mid-September to early November to sell to nurseries every year.

“Idaho is the only place in the country without weevil,” he says. “The acorns I pick up in Utah are heated in 120-degree water in a big pot for 30 minutes to kill the weevil without harming the acorn.”

For several years, Luker has partnered with local members of the National Turkey Federation to plant thousands of oak trees.

“Turkeys eat acorns in the fall and the male catkins in spring,” says Luker. “Flocks do well when oak trees are around.”

Many of his trees are also ideal for shelterbelts on ag land.

“Shelterbelts are a worthwhile investment,” he says. “Livestock does better with shade and shelter, and certain crop yields improve with a windbreak. You need at least three rows with a dense shrub, evergreen and hardwood.”

One of the most eye-catching oaks Luker has planted is a cross of a big bur oak and



Dianna Troyer/For the Capital Press

Acorns and other trees are planted in reusable plastic containers with perforated holes that encourage lateral root growth. WestWood Growers Conservation Nursery offers 60 types of oak trees.



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Deciduous tree expert Dave Luker sells thousands of oaks for landscaping and wild turkey habitat.

Online

www.westwoodgrowers.com

a little live oak, bred by Walter Cottam at the University of Utah. It grows near the former Bannock Memorial Hospital.

“Most people think it’s a holly bush because it has leathery leaves that stay green through December,” he says. “It grows as a small shrub without irrigation but can reach 35 feet tall with irrigation. It’s beautiful.”

Luker advocates planting trees that are less common.

“It ultimately increases the diversity of our plant communities and limits the risk of major pest attacks,” he says.



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