

Nontimber Forest Products

Aromatics
Art Supplies
Bark
Berries
Charcoal
Chips
Cones
Cooking Wood
Craft Materials
Decoratives
Dyes
Fibers
Flavorings
Floral Products
Greenery
Honey
Medicinals
Moss
Mushrooms
Nuts
Pharmaceuticals
Pine Straw
Resins & Saps
Sawdust,
Seeds
Shavings and
Excelsior
Smoke Wood
Specialty Wood
Products
Syrup
Transplants
Weaving
Materials
Wild Fruits

Entrepreneurs in the forest

Traditionally, forests have been valued primarily for their timber production. However, there are thousands of species in the forest, many of which have been used for centuries for medicine, food, shelter, basketry, art, and other purposes. Many of these species may have commercial value that can provide supplemental and alternative income opportunities for forest landowners.

Nontimber forest products

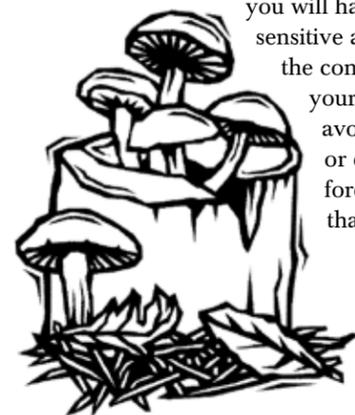
The nontimber forest products (NTFP) industry has been growing rapidly and now contributes billions of dollars to the US economy each year.

The definition of nontimber forest products generally includes all vegetation in the forest (except timber) with a potential commercial value. Other terms for nontimber forest products include special forest products, non-wood forest products, minor forest products, alternative forest products, and secondary forest products. Harvesting is also known as wildcrafting, gathering, collecting, and foraging.

Looking for a product

What can you market? This is where your inner entrepreneurial self comes in. Take a walk in your woods and make an inventory of everything you see—berries, moss, nuts, plants, mushrooms, etc. You may need to do some research to identify all of the plants and learn more about their uses.

When you decide on a product, it is important that you have an understanding about the role it plays in the forest ecosystem, its habitat requirements, sensitivity to harvest, and how to enhance its growth within the forest. Much of this information is not available so



you will have to be sensitive and aware of the consequences of your harvesting to avoid overharvest or damage to the forest or wildlife that live there.

Find your market

As a small business, you have the advantage of flexibility. You can work directly with local markets and supply what they need. Or you can look at what you have available and try to find a market for it. The tricky part when you find your market is to come up with the quantities needed at the time they are needed.

In some cases, marketing cooperatives have been successful by working together and pooling resources.

One way to try to find a market for your product(s) is to look in the yellow pages of the phone book and make a list of any possible buyer for anything growing on your forestland. Think big and creatively. For example, look under physicians, massage therapists, florists, art stores, bakeries, homeopaths, aromatherapy, candlemakers, local markets, festivals, etc. Talk to friends and relatives for more ideas.

Then go visit these places and talk to the owner or salespeople about their needs. Be professional and confident—you're a businessperson doing a market analysis and you have something to offer them.

Avoid pitfalls

Markets change, prices fluctuate, and nature can be untrustworthy. In other words, there are risks in any NTFP business. You need to be aware of these risks and willing to take them.

In order to avoid some of the pitfalls inherent in your business, you should have a clear understanding of your product, when to harvest it, and who is going to do the harvesting. It is essential to identify where and to whom the product will be sold and to understand current and projected demand for the product.

When you find a buyer, make sure you have a contract that spells out quantity needed, quality, delivery date, etc. That will help prevent misunderstandings and problems down the road.

It's a business; make a plan

To minimize surprises, it is imperative that you develop a business plan. The simple exercise of writing a business plan can point out any weaknesses in your enterprise. Your plan will include a complete analysis of the supply and demand for the product, with all costs as

well as profits anticipated. This will give you a more accurate idea of the feasibility of your plan. For example, if the cost of transporting your product to market outweighs the profit, then your idea is not feasible.

A business plan will also be necessary if you decide to go to a bank for financing. It will show that your enterprise is well thought through and has the potential for making a profit.

There are many places to get help in researching and writing a business plan. Local economic development agencies, small business development centers, UC Cooperative Extension, and others have expertise that will help you explore your business idea.

One example: pine straw

Pine straw (pine needles) is a common and relatively well-studied nontimber forest product in the southeast and eastern US. Gardeners and landscapers use pine straw as a mulch. Contractors have found that it helps protect the soil around a building site from compaction by heavy equipment. It is even used as an ingredient in livestock feed.

Pine straw is baled with a hay baler, which makes it easy, however it must first be hand raked into piles and cleaned of twigs and debris, which is very labor intensive.

Environmental considerations are important in the harvest of pine straw. Removing the needles from the forest floor reduces fire hazard, but loss of pine needles also has an impact on the forest. Needles play a critical role—they protect the root system of trees from freezing in the winter and hold moisture in the soil in summer. They also suppress the growth of underbrush which would otherwise compete with trees for water and nutrients.

In addition, pine needles are a reservoir of nutrients that is released as the needles decompose. Studies have shown that 40 pounds of nitrogen is lost for every 100 bales harvested. It takes 238 pounds of fertilizer to replace this loss, which is another cost to pine straw harvesters.

Research is ongoing to identify ways to minimize the impact of pine straw harvest while allowing a profit to be made. Some suggestions include waiting until February to harvest (pine straw is harvested between August and February), harvesting at three separate intervals, taking only the top layer of needles, or leaving

some needles around the base of each tree.

The complexity of even a simple product like pine straw illustrates the need for research and careful analysis before embarking on your commercial NTFP venture.

Taking pine straw a step further, in true entrepreneurial spirit the USDA Agricultural Research Service has developed designer pine straw mulches in blue, red, brown, gold, black, and green. The mulch works like natural pine straw in conserving soil moisture, moderating soil temperature, and helping stifle weeds, while the environmentally safe dyes slow down the straw's decomposition.

Sustainability concerns

Little is known about the short- or long-term effects of harvesting many of the species in the forest. There has been little or no research to determine how much of a species can be harvested, when it should be harvested, and how to mitigate any damage to the forest ecosystem. Those who are involved in the NTFP industry are in the forefront of this research and need to be involved in documenting this information.

Be aware of the role your products play in the forest ecosystem. The goal is to harvest sustainably, so that the forest remains healthy and the species thrive for future generations.

Stewardship considerations

Active management for NTFPs has the potential to enhance ecosystem complexity and play an important role in restoring biodiversity and balance to damaged forests. In addition, NTFPs add economic diversity and stability for rural forest communities by diversifying the products that are harvested from the forest.



Resources

Thomas, M.G. and D.R. Schumann. 1993. Income opportunities in special forest products. USDA Forest Service Ag Information Bulletin 666. 206 pp. <http://www.fpl.fs.fed.us/documnts/usda/agib666/agib666.htm>

Everett, Y. Building capacity for a sustainable non-timber forest products industry in the Trinity Bioregion. <http://www.odifpeg.org.uk/publications/rdfn/20/rdfn-20a-ii.pdf>

Institute for Culture and Ecology has three databases: a product database to help identify regional NTFPs, a bibliographic database with references, and a links database with links to resources. <http://www.ifcae.org/projects/ntfpwebsite1/> More info on NTFPs at <http://www.ifcae.org/ntfp/>

Non-Timber Forest Products Website (western states section under construction) <http://www.ifcae.org/ntfp/>