

Ruralite

TILLAMOOK PUD

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Nursery program prepares young people for the future **Page 4**

Tillamook Estuaries Partnership Native Plant Scientist Asa Skinner explains the importance of training tree roots to grow vertically. PHOTO BY CHELSEA YARNELL



Tillamook Estuaries Partnership Nursery Crew Lead Steve Sprague checks plant labels inside a greenhouse at TEP's plant nursery. Youth from the Oregon Youth Authority help cultivate native plants at the facility. PHOTO BY CHELSEA YARNELL

GROW WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED

Nursery program prepares young people for the future

By Chelsea Yarnell

Outside the fence at Camp Tillamook Youth Transitional Facility's campus is Tillamook Estuaries Partnership's native plant nursery, where plants and youth are cultivated.

"I have a cliché saying, and it parallels between plants and people," TEP Nursery Crew Lead Steve Sprague says. "We want to see our plants and people replanted again in the world and thrive."

Camp Tillamook Youth Transitional Facility is a work-study program under the umbrella of Oregon Youth Authority. The facility can house up to 25 young people, typically ranging in age from 16 to 24. It is next to Tillamook Youth Correctional Facility. Camp Tillamook's program aims to provide treatment, education, and work and life skills for youth preparing to transition back into the community.

As a partnership between TEP and Camp Tillamook, select youth help

cultivate nearly 84,000 plants at TEP's native plant nursery.

"We have a great working relationship with TEP," Camp Tillamook Director James Sapper says. "This program makes my program stronger. Only youth exhibiting positive, mature behavior and working on their treatment issues are available to screen for camp. This is an incentive-driven program, and we have a responsibility to our community partners to provide them with a motivated and safe workforce."

TEP is a local grassroots organization created in 2002 after community concern for the health of Tillamook Bay arose. The organization's projects focus on estuarine restoration, monitoring and education. It is only one of 28 nationally recognized estuary partnerships in the United States and its territories.

On the 1-acre native plant nursery property at the Port of Tillamook, TEP hosts the largest native plant nursery on the Oregon Coast.

"We nurture good men by providing them with opportunities," TEP Deputy Director Claudine Rehn says. "Our nursery crew is incredible. We value what they do out there."

A crew of eight youths and a small crew of TEP staff grow plants, shrubs and trees that are distributed to the Northwest Oregon Restoration Partnership.

"The plants we grow at the nursery are not available for retail," says TEP Native Plant Partnership Coordinator Musa Joko. "Instead, they are reserved for the members of the NORP partnership."

"We currently have more than 30 NORP partners, which include state and federal agencies, watershed councils, local nonprofits and tribes. Every year, the NPPC sends a plant request to the NORP members, allowing them to choose the plants they want to purchase at a significantly lower price."

The NORP Partnership program aims to restore degraded natural habitats in various

counties, including Tillamook, Lane, Lincoln and Clatsop. The plants grown at the nursery are genetically appropriate for the area.

“They need to be native to Oregon and adapted to the Oregon Coast,” Steve says. “We don’t want to just grow a lot of plants, but plants that have a high survival rate.”

Depending on the season, the youth and crew work sowing plants, transplanting, weeding, fulfilling plant orders, collecting plant data and building infrastructure.

“The incarcerated youth we work with are talented and multiskilled,” Musa says. “Some youths have made seed-cleaning equipment, which is a sign of ingenuity. They are dedicated and open to learning different skills.”

Plants grown at the nursery often come from locally gathered seeds. In 2023, TEP collected 50 pounds of hyper-local seeds.

“We’re collecting seeds with wild genetics and putting them back here,” TEP Native Plant Scientist Asa Skinner says.

From seed to ready-to-plant takes roughly two years, with TEP’s partners often requesting what is grown.

“We fill a niche that’s really needed,” Asa says. “We have incredible flexibility, so we can adapt quickly to landowners’ needs.”

In addition to physical skills, TEP staff work to create an environment where youth can practice their soft skills.

“We go over basic skills like communication, how to dress, how to listen and follow instructions, and how to be accountable for really simple tasks,” Asa says. “It’s mutually beneficial. It gets the youth outside of the fence. They have some normalcy and learn job skills. Our goals are to have as normal an employee experience as we can.”

Steve notes that feedback from the youth’s future employers reflects well on the nursery program.

“It is really transformative outside of camp,” he says. “They don’t necessarily continue doing nursery jobs, but the skills we teach are helpful in any career they get into.”

TEP staff highlight former youth crew members who have attended veterinary school, worked in restaurants and started businesses.



Tillamook Estuaries Partnership’s native plant nursery—the largest of its kind on the Oregon Coast—is outside the fence at Camp Tillamook Youth Transitional Facility campus at the Port of Tillamook Bay. PHOTO COURTESY OF TEP

“It’s the last step before transitioning back to family or their next step,” James says. “It’s teaching a daily adult routine: Get up, go to school or go to work. Our parole officers love it, and families love it. Kids who are ready to go back [to society] need a sense of community and care.”

Rounding out the full-job experience is that crew members are compensated for their work, receiving hourly payment above the federal minimum wage.

“It takes \$320,000 to run the nursery program each year, with a large portion of that money being the payment to the youth,” Asa says.

The native plant nursery is not open to the public, but the community is invited to attend special events at the nursery. There

is a plant sale Saturday, April 13, at 10 a.m., where plant fanatics can visit the nursery and purchase surplus plants. Shoppers can also reserve plants before the sale by visiting tbnep.org/programs.

“People can come and get their hands in the dirt and see the plants in person,” Steve says. “Since we’re on OYA property, they normally can’t come here. It’s great for people to get to know some of what we do, and it’s a chance to get people out here.” ■

The community is encouraged to attend Nurturing Native events at the native plant nursery this spring. Volunteers can help TEP nursery staff thin and space plants. Dates are to be announced. For upcoming events and specific details, visit tbnep.org or follow TEP on social media channels.