Special forest products

C. C. Schnepf

The term "special forest products" refers to nontimber commodities harvested from forests. Consumers in the United States and abroad are interested in a wide variety of plant materials and fungi gathered in the wild. Markets for special forest products have expanded considerably. Special forest products with commercial potential that may be harvested in Idaho include:

- **Edible wild mushrooms** — morels (*Morchella conica, Morchella angusticeps*), boletes (*Boletus edulis*), chanterelles (*Cantharellus subalbidus, Cantharellus cibarius*), matsutake (*Tricholoma magnivelare*, formerly *Armillaria ponderosa*).
- **Fresh floral greens** — evergreen boughs (western red cedar, grand fir, subalpine fir, white pine), beargrass, pachistima ("Oregon boxwood"), red osier dogwood, mosses.
- **Dried flowers** — pine cones, teasel, baby's breath.
- **Wild berries** — huckleberries, serviceberries, elderberries, chokecherries, "black-caps" (black raspberries), thimbleberries, blackberries.
- **Seeds, roots, bark, and other plant parts** — cascara bark, Pacific yew bark, rose hips, princes pine, licorice root, tree seed.

Starting any new enterprise can be taxing, both financially and personally. Before investing time and energy harvesting special forest products, you should clarify your goals, obtain basic information on markets, and evaluate harvest feasibility.

Why harvest?

Why are you interested in special forest products? To supplement income? Be your own boss? Work out-of-doors? Use free time? The feasibility of special forest products harvest varies according to which goals (both long and short term) are most important to you. For example, if income is your primary goal and the final budget doesn't indicate at least a minimum wage, extra income through employment might be a better option. However, if working outside or being your own boss is important, wages may not matter as much.

Markets

Harvesters must understand special forest product markets, as they are often more limited than those for more traditional forest products, such as saw or pulp-logs. There are several questions to ask.

Who's buying?

Special forest product buyers may advertise through magazines, newspapers, local bulletin boards, word of mouth, and other methods. If you can't locate buyers through these channels, contact people who purchase the final product (retail florists, restaurants, grocery stores, etc.). You may be able to sell to them directly. Otherwise, backtrack to their suppliers, in person or by telephone. For the first few years, consider selling through a reputable broker who is already familiar with the market network.

What are they buying?

After locating a buyer, be sure you understand product specifications before harvest, then meet or exceed them. Find out:

- How *much* product do buyers want, including minimum quantity purchased?
- How *fresh* must the material be?
- What are the buyer's specific *size, color, or other requirements*?
- How must the material be *processed* (chopped, packaged, etc.)?
- What is the buyer's *unit of measurement*? Is the material purchased by the pound, by the "bunch" (how big is a "bunch"), or some other measure?
- What *prices* are paid?

- How much insect, disease, or handling *damage* is allowed?
- How much is price reduced for *lower quality material*?
- How must the material be *packaged* for delivery?

Don't forget to consider transportation and storage of collected materials, especially if you are responsible for shipping over a long distance. Special facilities may be necessary to prepare material for shipping (tools to dry, bale, etc.), and maintain product quality (refrigeration, moisture control, etc.).

When are they buying?

Special forest products harvest should be timed to buyers' purchasing. This is particularly important for materials with a limited shelf life, such as fresh mushrooms or floral greens, and those purchased seasonally, such as evergreen boughs for Christmas wreaths. Get a contract or purchase order for the amount and purchase price of material delivered, if possible.

Harvest sites

You might harvest from your own land, public lands (national forests, state land), and lands owned by the forest industry or private individuals. If not harvesting on your own property, make formal arrangements with the landowner. Permits are usually required to harvest commercially from public lands.

You may wish to obtain some type of written harvest lease. If there are other harvesters in the area, this avoids conflict. A lease can also be used to arrange site treatments to enhance the growth of materials you harvest.

Some states require a permit to transport special forest products, regardless of where they were harvested. In 1992 this was not required in Idaho, but it may be in the future. Consider obtaining some type of written verification from the landowner who permitted your harvest, particularly if you are transporting material out of state.

Sustainable harvesting

There is often concern about the effect of special forest products harvest on plants and forest health. Unfortunately, there is limited research on the physiology, ecology, and impact of harvest for many plants and fungi harvested for special forest products. On some sites, harvest impacts may not be critical, for example, brush on a site that is being reforested. However, if the plant is highly valued on the site and harvest appears to damage the ability of the plant to regenerate within a reasonable time, reduce your harvest or move to a site where the impact is not important (if available).

Learn as much as you can about the plants and how to harvest them without permanent damage. As a rule of thumb, take only a portion of the material available on a site, particularly if little is known about the plant's response to harvest. Public lands usually have guidelines for permitted harvest locations and methods.

It is also important to care for roads and campsites in harvest areas. Leave campsites clean. Don't drive on wet roads that are vulnerable to rutting and other forms of erosion. Close gates. Put out campfires and observe other fire safety rules. Conscientious harvest practices ensure good working relationships with public agencies, landowners, and other harvesters.

Harvest feasibility

To assess, in advance, special forest products harvest feasibility, prepare a budget that itemizes:

- Fixed costs (those that remain constant with harvest level) such as harvesting tools.
- Variable costs (those that vary with harvest level) such as shipping and packaging, storage, transportation, and labor, permit or lease fees, and equipment maintenance.
- Noncash costs, such as personal vehicle use, storage facilities, tools already owned, etc. These items will wear out sooner (and depreciate in value) if they are used for your harvest.
- Interest associated with costs (if your effort requires financing).
- Expected revenues based on market information and production estimates (how much you expect to harvest per day, hour, etc.).

You should also inventory time — how much is available and when. Finally, check with state departments of agriculture and commerce for applicable state or federal regulations, especially for edible products, potential noxious weeds, or products shipped out-of-state.

After collecting this information, ask yourself: What hourly wage would be received for harvesting? Could more income be made at other available jobs or enterprises? Do other advantages, such as "being your own boss" or spending time outdoors, make up for lower wages?

Writing it down

Information about feasibility, budgets, markets, and harvest sites can be very complicated to sort out and evaluate if you don't write it down. A written summary of this information provides a clear outline of the special forest products enterprise, which helps you to evaluate its initial and ongoing feasibility, keep records for taxes and other purposes, allocate resources, and obtain financing, if necessary.

Getting better prices

After you are more familiar with a given special forest product market, there are several possible ways to make the harvest more profitable. You might try to:

Find a market niche — Is your material unique in any way? You may get higher product prices for material with distinctive characteristics or which can be provided when unavailable elsewhere (i.e., if your collection sites are ready earlier or later than others).

Form a marketing cooperative — Forming a cooperative with other harvesters may help you get better prices by offering more consistent, larger quantities.

Sell dry materials — Dry materials (for example, mushrooms) may allow you to take advantage of different storage and shipping options, higher seasonal prices, and less critical product standards.

Investigate export markets — Due to cultural differences and other factors, there may be greater demand for a product abroad than locally. Your state department of agriculture or commerce may be able to assist you in this effort.

Process your material — If the firm you're selling to processes the harvest and sells it to consumers, perhaps you or others in your community could find a niche and develop a new local business to do the same (for example, wreath manufacturing, berry jams, etc.).

The author — **Chris C. Schnepf**, northern Idaho area Extension forester, University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System, Kootenai County, Coeur d'Alene.

For further reading

From Washington State University:

EB 721	Harvesting Evergreen Brush and Ferns (25 cents)
EB 1059	A Guide to Floral Greens ($2.00)
EB 1580	Special Forest Products Buyers/Processors in the Pacific Northwest and Coastal British Columbia ($1.00)

Write Bulletin Office, Cooperative Extension, Cooper Publications Building, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington 99164-5912, or call (509) 335-2857.

From Oregon State University:

EC 1192	Contracts for Woodland Owners and Christmas Tree Growers ($1.00)

Write Agricultural Communications, Oregon State University, Administrative Services A422, Corvallis, Oregon 97331-2219, or call (509) 737-2513.

From University of Idaho:

CIS 791	Budgeting — A Management Tool (35 cents)
CIS 840	Forming a Cooperative (35 cents)
EXT 675	Economic Feasibility Studies for Agribusiness Firms (50 cents)
PNW 241	Developing a Marketing Plan for Fresh Produce (75 cents)

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