

MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF **AGRICULTURE** | **NURSERY PROGRAM Q & A**

Here at the Montana Department of Agriculture (MDA), we aim to protect agricultural producers, consumers, and the environment by administering services that assure the quality of nursery stock in the state and minimize the risk of pests and invasive species. It recently came to our attention that it isn't always clear when a landscapers nursery license is needed or not. So, Frank Etzler, Natural Resources Manager at MDA, decided to sit down with Nursery Program Specialist Carson Thomas to clarify some questions about the program.

Frank Etzler: Thank you for talking with me today, Carson. So, to begin, why do we need nursery licenses?

Carson Thomas: Happy to be here. So, nursery licenses allow businesses in Montana to engage in the sale or resale of nursery stock. The money from the licensing program ensures that the Department of Agriculture can make sure our state's green industry is protected from harmful invasive pests, such as insects and noxious weeds. We don't want to be spreading those artificially. We also look for terribly destructive invasive diseases, with the main one that we look for, and that a lot of people would be familiar with, is late blight, a potato virus that caused the potato famine in Ireland back in 1849. The money from the licensing program allows us to fund programs to help control and regulate those and it also allows us to go around and inspect nurseries and ensure that everyone in the green industry is following the same rules and it's just, you know, doing the best we can to provide happy and healthy plants to Montana.

FE: Thank you for that. So, who needs a nursery license?

CT: So any business that sells or resells nursery stock, kind of the the quick and easy way to view the rule on nursery stock here means any plants with roots meant for propagation and not directly for consumption. Anyone who sells or resells that nursery stocks should be licensed and we do have all kinds of operations that are licensed. That's everything from wholesale growers, tree farms, garden centers, florists, and even grocery stores that sell the little house plants. Landscapers and sod farms also have licenses. Farmers markets even get licenses to cover smaller businesses that just come and sell a few plant starts at the farmers market. Every big box store that does any kind of plant business has a nursery license as well, so Walmart, Target, even Big Lots. The one that a lot of folks overlook is that pet stores are licensed and that's because they have aquarium and terrarium plants for sale.

FE: Are there different categories of licenses?

CT: There are. They are based on the gross annual sales or resale of nursery stock. It's a tiered system that ranges from \$5,000 or less in gross annual sales to over \$250,000 in gross annual sales. License fees range from \$25 at the lowest end to \$400 at the highest. There's also set aside categories for landscapers and for sod growers.

FE: What does a nursery license cover?

CT: Not only does having a nursery license allow you to sell and resell plants for propagation in Montana, but it also gets you access to a wide variety of services from the Montana Department of Agriculture. We have a great team of highly skilled entomologists on staff that can help with any questions about "creepy crawlies". We have a vertebrate pest specialist that can help with any of the bigger fuzzier pests. We've got horticulturists on staff that can help with plant ID and disease identification. We have noxious weed specialists, pesticide specialists, marketing specialists; we have all these different things that having that license gives you access to. It also helps open up that point of contact with me, the nursery specialist, where I can get you whatever help you may need on whatever problems you might find. So we're not just a regulatory agency, we're also here to help Montana in general.

FE: And finally what goes on in a typical inspection? And in this case, I want to clarify that this is just for the landscape category that you mentioned.

CT: It's a little difficult to say a "typical inspection" because every inspection is a little bit different, and they're all kind of tailored to that operation in particular. Most landscaper inspections can be as simple as just a quick phone call or an email with a few questions such as: "Where you get most of your plants?"; "Do you have a holding yard or do you pick them up and take them directly to a job site?"; and things like "What are your typical pest management practices if you come across any pest or disease issues?". With that example, if the operation does have a holding yard, then I schedule a quick little walk around inspection at a future date. Those usually take about 15 minutes and they're mostly focused on checking for potential pest and disease vectors, and things like where is the culled material stored, what's the water source, how are things laid out, and just making sure things look as happy and healthy as possible.

FE: And how long would the phone call take?

CT: Most of them are on average, 10 to 20 minutes. They'll run a little bit longer if folks have a few extra questions, but generally, I would say never more than a half hour.

FE: Alright, that is all the questions that we have. Do you have any final comments?

CT: If there's any further questions feel free to reach out to me directly. My contact information is on our Department website (agr.mt.gov/nurseries). There's a lot of great information on that website and it can probably help answer some questions too.

FE: Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.

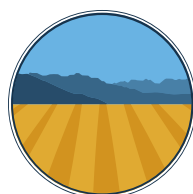
CT: Happy to do so.



Frank Etzler is an entomologist with the Montana Department of Agriculture, where he oversees the CAPS survey program and helps with the Nursery and Apiary programs. He did his graduate work at MSU Bozeman and has had the opportunity to visit every county in Montana. He looks forward to help protect Montana's natural resources and green industries by monitoring for invasive pests and diseases.



Carson Thomas has been involved in the green industry of Montana for most of his life, from buying plants at the local nurseries as a kid to working in one of those nurseries through high school and college. He graduated with a degree in horticulture, and later moved on to become a groundskeeper for FWP, and eventually the Nursery Program Specialist for the Montana Department of Agriculture. Carson now inspects nurseries, certifies exports, surveys for pests, and takes action to prevent the artificial spread of invasive species of insects, plants, and diseases.



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