

# Creating Cottonwood Groves: A Primer

By

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**“Ya just can’t stick a tree in the ground...”** If establishing a cottonwood grove is identified as addressing a resource concern, then a great deal of preparation must be planned and applied before the first tree is ever planted. The first two steps in cottonwood establishment are: 1. finding the appropriate source material (this is usually an existing grove of cottonwood with 1-2 year old suckers for cutting and growing out into new trees....called rooted cuttings) and 2. Identifying the proper position on the landscape to plant the trees (too high on the landscape and the trees will dehydrate during the dry summer months, if planted to low on the landscape, the roots will drown in the high water table of late spring and early summer).



Land manager Levi Asmussen planting a Black Cottonwood next to the Sinlahekin River in Okanogan County. Note the fabric mulch.

The next step is site preparation. Applying the proper herbicide and reducing competition by undesirable weed species is a critical step in the establishment of the cottonwoods. The site must be free of all other vegetation before planting the cottonwoods can begin. To keep the site free of vegetation after the trees have been planted, a fabric mulch is laid down and stapled into the ground.



Pullman Plant Materials Manager, Mark Stannard Waters a Black Cottonwood after it has been planted.

Planting a cottonwood grove is not the same as planting trees for commercial purposes. Spacing the trees in a 10 feet by 10 feet spacing grid over many acres is not the recommended technique. Instead, much smaller clumps of about 20 feet by 20 feet of fabric mulch, with the trees planted about 4 feet apart, will be established. This will allow the land manager to monitor and maintain the site until the cottonwoods are able to survive on their own. This also means the trees can be protected from large mammal herbivory with fencing. Protection from smaller mammals can be accomplished by setting out traps constructed of PVC tubing and baited with a commercially available pesticide. Once planted, the cottonwoods will need to be watered periodically during the early summer months for the first one to three years.

Establishing a new cottonwood grove takes planning and a bit of work, but the benefits to wildlife, bank soil erosion, water quality, water quantity, air quality, and the increased aesthetics to the broader landscape all make it worth the work.



Artist's drawing of an old cottonwood grove.