**Wildlings – An Alternative to Seeds**

Growing a mixed crop of framework tree species from seeds may take 18 months or more because you have to wait for trees to fruit and for seeds to germinate. So, is there a faster way to produce framework tree saplings? Wildlings are seedlings dug up from the forest and cultivated in a nursery. Forest trees usually produce vast numbers of surplus seedlings, most of which die. So, digging up a few of them for transfer into a nursery does not harm the forest ecosystem. If wildlings are transplanted from a cool, shady forest directly into an open deforested site they usually die of transplantation shock. So, wildlings must first be potted, cared for in a nursery and hardened off before planting-out.

In the forest, locate several suitable parent trees of the required species, which fruited heavily the previous fruiting season. It is best to collect seedlings from around many parent trees to maintain genetic diversity. Collect seedlings, no taller than 20 cm (larger ones have high mortality due to severe transplantation shock); within a 5 m radius of the parent tree (those seedlings would die anyway from competition with the parent tree). The primary consideration when collecting wildlings is to minimize root damage, so dig them up during the rainy season, when the soil is soft. Lever out very young, small seedlings carefully with a spoon or dig up larger seedlings with a trowel, retaining a plug of soil around the roots. Place the seedlings in a bucket with a little water, or use containers made from banana stems.

If wildlings are more than 20 cm tall, consider pruning them just after digging them up to reduce mortality and increase growth rate. Cut back the stem by one third to one half. Make a 45° cut about 5 mm above an axillary bud. Alternatively cut back the larger leaves by about 50%. Secondary roots might require trimming to enable seedlings to be potted easily into 9 x 2½-inch plastic bags, filled with the standard potting mix described above, without bending the tap root. Keep the potted wildlings under deep shade (20% of normal sunlight) for about 6 weeks or construct recovery chambers. Then, follow standard procedures for care and hardening-off saplings grown from seed. Compared with growing planting stock from seed, these techniques can shorten the time needed to grow trees to a plantable size by several months to a year and reduce production costs.



***A recovery chamber is constructed from a frame made from split bamboo, in a shaded area of the nursery. The frame is then covered with a polythene sheet, the edges of which are buried in the trench to seal the chamber. Humidity builds up in the chamber, which prevents transplantation shock. After a few weeks, the chamber is partially opened so the plants can acclimatize to ambient conditions and finally the cover is removed completely.***