

# **TREE-PLANTING SCAMS & DECEPTIONS (Brief Version)**

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Individual contributors and businesses are unaware of the many scams and deceptions within the nonprofit tree-planting industry. While some tree-planting organizations are strictly 'quality-focused' others may be engaging in activities and communications that are dishonest, deceptive and immoral. This article will present an industry insider's view regarding some of the ways in which some nonprofit tree-planting organizations may be running scams and deceiving their contributors. Readers will learn what red flags to look for, what questions to ask before making a contribution and how to properly select a tree-planting organization that best meet your needs.

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## **Money-For-Nothing Scam**

Version one of the scam is when the tree-planting organization claims that for every dollar (or some other sum) they receive, they will 'plant-a-tree' and what they really do is simply plop a tree seed in the ground, kick some dirt over the hole and walk away. They did not plant a tree but poorly plant a 'potential' tree in the form of a tree seed. This insufficient approach leads to a low or non-existent survival rate. Version two of this scam is when the tree-planting organization is involved in a tree-planting project where insufficient care is taken during the seedling growing, transplantation and maintenance phase for the trees to grow well or even survive. Version three of the scam is for the tree-planting organization to pay another group to purchase and plant the trees but they do not pay this group the full purchase cost of the seedling or if they do then they provide insufficient funds for that seedling to grow well. Instead, they cover only part of the purchase or growing cost while claiming to the public that they are 'planting a tree' for their contribution. Thus, the contributor is only planting part of the cost of the tree and not the entire tree as they are led to believe. Version four of this scam is when the tree-planting organization receives some specific sum from the public to 'plant-a-tree' and pays a third party to purchase and plant the trees. This third party is only able to plant a certain number of trees in a location per year. When they receive funds from the tree-planting organization that is more than the number of trees they can plant in a particular

year, instead of holding-over the extra funds for next year, they move the funds to other departments such as administration, equipment purchase, etc. Unless the contract with the third party specifically states that ‘unused funds will be rolled-over for use as stated in the contract for the next year’, the use of the funds are in question.

### **Avoiding The Money For Nothing Scam**

If the tree-planting organization does not clearly address the above points on their website or product literature, feel free to contact the group and ask them hard questions regarding the above. If you are unsatisfied with the answers – contribute somewhere else.

### **‘What Happens to the Trees’ Scam**

Members of organizations like GROW ([growforests.org](http://growforests.org)) and several other small tree-planting organizations are open and up-front about what happens to the trees after they are planted but many tree-planting organizations in the industry hide the fact that when they plant tree seedlings, they go into locations where they may or will be logged or coppiced. When asked about the chances of the trees being logged in the future, they downplay this possibility by claiming that ‘the chances of logging are ridiculously small.’ They are deeply afraid that this information will reduce or eliminate your willingness to give them your contribution. Two things make this a scam: one, if the tree-planting organization is wearing the mantle of performing ‘environmental goodness’ then the trees being logged partway through life is doing much less environmental good than trees that live two-to-three times as long; two, when a forest is logged, it can be performed in ways that generate insignificant, minimal, medium or large amounts of damage to the different aspects of the forest ecosystem. If a tree-planting organization is claiming ‘do good’ status and they are indirectly supporting or simply condoning mediocre or poor logging methods for the trees being planted then they are hypocrites at best. In addition, the contribution may be financially benefitting individuals and groups that the contributor is completely unaware of and who they may oppose helping. This is wrong!

Contributors should know up front if the trees are planted in potential or definite future logging areas, the degree and methods of long-term sustainability (that goes far beyond the number of trees replanted) for that part of the forest, the logging methods that are and may be used in that location and who financially or otherwise benefits from the logging. Contributors need to understand that not all logging is the highly destructive, clear-cutting, ‘many roads’ methods used in the past. It has gotten better in many places and a certain degree of logging is necessary for civilization to continue chugging along. The degree of sustainability and care used during the logging process however is something that contributors should become educated about.

### **Avoiding The ‘What Happens to the Trees’ Scam**

If considering funding the planting of tree seedlings, ask the tree-planting organization if they are going into potential or future logging locations. If they answer 'yes' or 'possibly' then ask them what groups will be performing the logging in the future, what logging methods are likely to be used and how the forest may be damaged as a result. Also ask them if they do or will engage in any advocacy towards improving logging methods of these groups. Communicate that you will contribute substantially more if the organization becomes acutely aware of the logging issue and dedicates a percentage of profit towards an effective method of catalyzing improved logging methods in the areas where the tree-planting organization plants trees.

This will create a little bit of a stir. In some tree-planting locations, it is impossible to determine in the future what logging methods will be used and/or by whom. Also, many tree-planting organizations believe that it is beyond their mission to perform advocacy towards better logging approaches. For small and many medium-size tree-planting groups, they legitimately do not have the time or resources (people and money) to engage in harvest method advocacy. Larger nonprofit, tree-planting organizations however have tons of money, staff and volunteers (they automatically lie about the money so as to not turn-off existing and potential contributors) so they have an ethical obligation to strongly advocate for better logging methods. By not doing so, their message of 'giving back to the environment' becomes completely diluted. You can 'give them the screws' by constantly nagging them that saving the forest by planting trees but doing nothing about the massive damage done when they are cut down is both unethical and hypocrisy. They will listen to your contribution more than your mouth so always include a note communicating that it would be larger except that there is little or no evidence of improved logging advocacy.

### **Protecting The Forest Scam**

For a set contribution amount, you are told that 'X' amount of forest will be protected. By itself, this sentence means absolutely nothing. There are many ways this scam can be performed. First, what does 'protected' mean? If it means only from government and business logging but not illegal logging, roads, mining, controlled burns, land pollution, squatters, hunting, tree disease/pests and so forth then the forest may still be savaged and destroyed. So protection must be deeply and broadly defined. Second, for how long is the land protected? Infinitely? For twenty years? Until the next coup or recession? Third, how is the forest protected and how effective is this protection? If illegal logging occurred in the past, is there an effective plan to stop it from now on? Fourth, who benefits? Is the money simply a 'pay-off' to a government so that they log different areas instead? Is this a government that contributors want to subsidize? In protecting this land, are the indigenous people adversely affected? Squatters are a big problem in many locations and are they forceably evicted and/or relocated? Fifth, was the land already purchased and the contributions simply paying it off or does the contribution go towards a new parcel of land being protected? Sixth, who ends up owning the land? Is it a

government group, a nonprofit, or some shadowy private organization that is morally filthy? Is the ownership secure or as is the case in many countries revoked at the drop of a hat by a corrupt government official? Seventh, if the land is damaged, is there a plan and funding for repairing it?

### **Avoiding The ‘Protecting The Forest’ Scam**

Carefully check the website and product literature of the organization claiming to protect ‘X’ amount of forest land for ‘Y’ dollars. You are searching for detailed, clear answers to the following questions:

1. Is the organization buying-up the forest land A) a commercial enterprise, B) associated with one, or C) strictly a protection agency? What is their history, who is their staff, what are their associations and what is their reputation?
2. Does ‘protection’ include forest management, which may include periodic logging? If so, what logging methods are used and what specifically is being spent and done to repair the ecological damage due to the logging? How is effectiveness determined?
3. Is the forest being adequately protected from illegal loggers? If so, how and how is effectiveness determined?
4. Is the forest being protected from squatters and indigenous poor people? If so, how; and how is effectiveness determined?
5. Does the contribution specifically account for new land being purchased and protected or are previous purchases simply being reimbursed?
6. Does the protection last indefinitely according to contract or does it only last until a certain point in time? Who actually owns the land being protected and what exactly does the contract regarding the land ownership say?
7. If the pitch is something like \$1 or some other exact sum protects 1 acre of rainforest, is the actual total cost in real life the nonprofit pays to protecting that acre exactly \$1 or is it more or less? Can they document in writing or by showing you the contract what the actual cost for protecting one acre is?

Nonprofit reforestation organizations not providing this information are not properly informing their contributors. What you can do is to telephone them and ask for answers to these questions in writing. Be polite but firm about this.

### **‘Plant-A-Tree’ Phrase Deceptions**

Industry insiders know that the phrase ‘plant-a-tree’ is utterly meaningless without a lot of highly specific, additional information. The first deception is promoting the idea that simply putting a tree into the ground is good for the environment. Some trees (such as the Cottonwood) actually increase pollution by indirectly catalyzing ozone production while sucking-up little carbon dioxide. Other species planted in the wrong place can mess-up the water table or be an invading species that disrupts the ecosystem. The general public does not know that trees planted in Northern latitudes tend to absorb far less carbon dioxide than fast-growing, large-boled, long leafed trees in equatorial regions. How the trees are logged also matters. The gasoline burned while building the logging roads, the activity of the logging trucks and logging equipment can offset the benefits of the trees collecting the carbon dioxide. Thus, the nature of the tree-planting project along with the harvesting method matters.

The ‘Plant-A-Tree’ phrase has many additional ways in which it may not be all that wholesome and green. First, tree-planting organizations should refer to planting a ‘tree seedling’ (baby tree) and not a ‘tree seed’. Second, there are numerous things that need to be done in making sure that the seedling (if it is not a larger-sized tree) is planted properly. The seedling is usually grown in a seed bed until it is large, old and strong enough to be transplanted into its final location. In many parts of the world, it has to be transplanted at the right time of the year and in a location appropriate for its species, the available sunlight, soil conditions, altitude and forest environment. Third, the physical mechanics of transplantation have to be performed correctly. Fourth, some seedlings must receive post transplantation care such as watering, weed control and protection from animals such as deer for some time. When these and other things are not done or are done poorly, the trees may sicken or die. The percentage of trees that live for a certain amount of time after they are transplanted is called the ‘survival rate’.

People in the industry who care more about quality than profitability look at these and other factors in determining if ‘planting-a-tree’ is simply a marketing phrase to increase contributions or describing a philosophy where maximizing the long-term survival rate in a highly sustainable forest. Members of GROW ([growforests.org](http://growforests.org)) and a few selected other tree-planting organizations consistently display this type of approach but sadly, there are ‘money machines’ in the industry that are all show with little focus on quality. There are even a few tree-planting organizations that perform with excellence in some types of tree-planting projects and poorly in others. There are also those that vary in overall quality over time – both up and down.

### **Avoiding ‘Plant-A-Tree’ Phrase Deceptions**

Discover how much care and concern the tree-planting organization has for the seedling care in the establishment phase by asking them hard questions. Do they simply spit-back generic platitudes about the seedlings or do they offer concrete examples of how they go the extra mile? Members of GROW ([growforests.org](http://growforests.org)) and a few other nonprofit tree-planting groups consistently show excellent care in all aspects of the establishment phase but some others do not.

### **‘Number of Trees Planted’ Phrase Deceptions**

Almost all tree-planting organizations tout the ‘number of trees’ that they will or have planted in relation to a specific project, country or in total since a particular point-in-time. The more good the tree-planting organization appears to be doing, the more individual contributions and business partnerships they get. A shallow way to suggest ‘doing good’ is to focus on the number of trees planted rather than the overall quality of the tree-planting project.

There are many, many ways in which the number of trees planted can be a lie or simply deceptive and I will only list some of them for reasons of space. First, the number may be an outright fabrication. Second, the number may be an exaggeration such as rounding-up 33,487 to 35,000. Third, the ‘trees’ may simply be tree seeds and not seedlings. Fourth, the trees may have been planted so poorly that they mostly died within five years. Fifth, the trees in a project may have been ‘double-counted’ such as getting the trees free through a grant, planting them for free by volunteers and then turning around and making contributors fund the ‘planting of a tree’ with their contributions. They may have been counted once during the planting and then again as the funds come in to ‘cover the nonexistent costs’ of planting each tree. Sixth, if the tree-planting organization gives money to another group to plant the trees and that outside group can only plant ‘X’ number of trees that year, the excess funds may get ‘diverted’ towards administration. Seventh, it may cost \$0.80 cents to purchase and plant a tree. The tree-planting group charges a dollar-per-tree but only pays a nickel towards each tree. Thus, it actually takes \$16 worth of contributions to properly plant a tree instead of the dollar that is being advertised. This means the true number of trees planted may be 1/16<sup>th</sup> of the number promoted.

There is another way in which this number can become fuzzy. For example, a tree-planting organization may be invited to assist a series of villages in another country by creating and implementing an ongoing tree-planting strategy for the area. They send a trained technician to the location and he or she goes through the process of growing seedlings from seed in seed beds, planting the trees and training ‘forest caretakers’ to perpetuate this process. While the technician is physically present performing this process, the number of trees planted by the organization is easily calculable. When the technician leaves and the ‘forest caretakers’ are growing and planting the trees, are those new trees grown and planted when the technician is no longer there count? One would think not but the picture becomes muddied. What if the tree-planting organization gives the villages partial tree-planting support such as providing tree seeds or tree seedlings on a periodic basis but not getting physically involved in doing the planting? In other words, at what level of support does it count or no longer count? If the tree-planting organization is clearly responsible for directly planting 25,000 trees in a particular part of a particular country, 75,000 trees where they gave partial support and 200,000 trees planted by the

‘forest caretakers’ specifically due to the past presence and efforts of the technician then the ‘number of trees planted’ can be a blurry number indeed.

### **Avoiding The ‘Number of Trees Planted’ Phrase Deception**

You will avoid this deception by understanding that by itself, the number is meaningless. A much more meaningful criteria is looking at: 1) the long-term survival rate, 2) the quality of the project from start to finish, and 3) the benefits of the project to the environment and to people.

If you want more information about how the tree-planting organization came to their number, see if they can offer detailed financial and operational information about the project(s). Some organizations – such as the public foundations in GROW ([growforests.org](http://growforests.org)) often provide this.

### **‘Carbon Capture’ Phrase Deceptions**

As global warming is a concern for many, some tree-planting organizations tout how planting a tree will reduce global warming by capturing carbon. This is a deceptive phrase that requires some explanation. To drastically oversimplify the explanation, the planting of some tree species in some locations actually increases global warming, some tree-planting events has only minor effect in reducing carbon dioxide and some tree-planting has a powerful effect in removing carbon dioxide. Simply planting a tree doesn’t mean that you are reducing global warming.

There are particular factors that maximize long-term carbon capture through tree-planting. Large boled, broad leaf, fast growing indigenous trees of certain species planted by hand in equatorial latitudes where the soil is good, the proper amount of sunlight and water is present; and where there is no harvesting; or selective harvesting occurs with the use of minimal vehicles, captures the most carbon. The idea is that the maximum amount of carbon dioxide goes into long-term storage in the soil.

The farther you move away from planting at or near the equator and the closer you plant the trees in far Northern and Southern latitudes where the trees tend to be evergreens, the soil being is less rich (more arid) and where tree-planting and logging take place; particularly by vehicles, the less carbon absorption takes place. In fact, certain tree species such as the Cottonwood are believed to absorb little carbon dioxide while emitting ozone-generating compounds.

Thus, when you plant evergreen tree seedlings in the United States or Canada in places where they will be harvested, you may be helping the forest environment in certain ways but comparatively speaking, you are doing little to reduce the problem of excess greenhouse gasses catalyzing global warming. The planting and logging methods also matter. If the planting and/or logging approach includes the building of roads, using a lot

of vehicles and essentially clear-cutting, they are burning a lot of gasoline to plant and log the trees. This needs to be part of the carbon capture equation. Remember, carbon stored in wood is temporary storage. Eventually, it returns back to the atmosphere as the wood decomposes or is burned. Thus, trees that are logged part-way through their lives offer shorter temporary storage than trees that never get logged.

There are certain individuals and groups that can officially test how much carbon capture occurs per acre of trees. Such tests are expensive but they do provide objective data as to carbon capture. The capture amount varies over the tree's life so the lifetime carbon capture figure may either be estimated or calculated through subsequent tests. One must factor in the revised lifespan if the trees are logged at a certain age. Another factor is the carbon spent in planting and logging the trees when vehicles and/or power tools are used. These carbon capture companies are largely unregulated so one must do the due diligence and check them out carefully.

What a very few tree-planting groups do is to replicate the existing test conditions where carbon capture was certified. The soil, sunlight, tree species and the number of trees planted per acre is the same. They can then approximate the carbon capture amount per tree. It is not 'certified' but the estimated amount of carbon capture per tree is probably very close to the certified location.

Now that we understand that 'planting a tree' 1) may increase 2) do little to decrease or 3) do a lot to decrease atmospheric carbon dioxide, the phrase 'Plant-a-tree to reduce Global Warming' becomes meaningless in and of itself. It is simply marketing.

### **Avoiding The 'Carbon Capture' Phrase Deception**

First, understand that the planting of trees 'can' be an excellent source of carbon capture... if a number of conditions are met. Many tree-planting projects meet few or none of these conditions so the carbon capture of certain projects may be comparatively minimal. Second, if a tree-planting organization uses the phrase as a marketing tool and has no data to back up how much carbon they are capturing, understand that they may be doing good in this one area but the quantity of good is undetermined. Third, if you want to plant trees specifically for the purpose of carbon capture, determine if the tree-planting organization is planting fast growing, long lived, broadleaf, trees of certain species in good soil in equatorial regions with appropriate sunlight and water. The planting should be by hand and if harvesting occurs, it should be either through coppicing and/or selective harvest methods with minimal gasoline burned in the process. The farther away one goes from these factors, the less carbon is stored in the earth in the long term.

### **Red Flags**



A 'red flag' in this context is something about a nonprofit tree-planting organization's internal operations, external activities or how it presents itself that generates concern. Many red flags are minor and can be ignored but some of them indicate that you should investigate further or completely avoid the organization. In this section, Major and minor red flags will be presented so that the reader can better discern what tree-planting organizations are best to assist.

## MAJOR RED FLAGS

There are three major red flags; each relating to transparency. The first major red flag is poor or nonexistent transparency in regards to financial information. This applies only to public foundations. Essentially, a public foundation is required to give any member of the public a certain degree of written financial information when asked. Ideally, this would be posted on their website as well as be available on charity websites such as [guidestar.org](http://guidestar.org) and [charitynavigator.org](http://charitynavigator.org) but some organizations will make you formally ask before providing the information. If you have a difficult time getting a public foundation's financials or if it takes too long to get it then this is of concern. Private foundations cannot post their financials on charity sites (like the two above) and are not subject to the same rules of financial disclosure as public foundations so they are exempt from public financial disclosure.

The second major red flag is poor or nonexistent transparency in regards to external operations. You should be able to quickly get detailed answers as to the process of how the organization grows or buys the seedlings, plants and maintains them. Ideally, they should have statistics on the survival rate, what percentage of the trees are logged, coppiced or left alone; and who actually plants the trees. Better public foundation, tree-planting organizations will also have a cost breakdown available of each tree planting project so contributors can see exactly where and how the money is spent. You need to know if the organization has a Code of Ethics, what it is, what their past and present relationship to advocacy is, how much money was and is spent on advocacy, and if the organization has any ties to any other organization that go beyond what the typical person would consider as basic business.

The third major red flag relates to transparency in regards to personnel. The organization's website should easily and clearly indicate 1) a complete physical mailing address, 2) a telephone number 3) an email address, 4) their IRS number, 5) state ID number, 6) if they are a public or a private foundation, 7) the name of the Executive Director and his or her bio, 8) the names of the board members and their bios and 9) the names of all senior staff and their bios. Why is this important? The first reason relates to tracking turnover. High and or frequent turnover is a bad sign that may indicate problems within the organization. The second reason is that in the past, there have been some organizations posing as environmental groups but which were actually front groups for an anti-environmental organization and/or religious organizations. In seeing detailed bios of all the key people, it becomes much harder to hide such affiliations. The third reason

relates to credibility and expertise. If the organization does not subcontract out the tree-planting but uses its own personnel to design and coordinate a tree-planting project, the detailed bios can give the contributor or business sponsor a better sense of the degree of expertise and experience of the individuals in charge.

#### Counterpoint: Major Red Flags

To the best of the author's knowledge, no US based, nonprofit tree-planting organization is absolutely perfect when it comes to the above three areas of transparency; although some organizations do much better than others. GROW (Great Reforest Organizations of Worth) members at [growforests.org](http://growforests.org) provide better transparency than most but there are selected, nonprofit, tree-planting organizations not part of GROW that also provide very good transparency. Thus, look for those organizations that provide the best transparency in the areas of finance (public foundations only), operations and personnel.

Public foundation tree-planting organizations providing poor transparency will obviously criticize these red flag standards in order to protect their contribution stream and reputation. Let them bitch! We live in an age with Madoff, Stanford and many other seemingly, reputable business people were massively defrauding their customers. If a public, nonprofit tree-planting foundation is unable or unwilling to provide adequate transparency, they should be in another industry.

There is also the issue of scale. All nonprofit, tree-planting organizations should be focused on achieving the highest standards when it comes to transparency and provide at least the fundamentals but the larger the organization (in terms of the number of staff, volunteers and revenue) the greater is the responsibility for providing transparency. Why? There is the greater potential for corruption and a larger number of individuals and companies that can be hurt if there are serious problems going on. In addition, the larger organizations have significantly greater financial and manpower ease in providing this information as compared to small foundations.

#### Audits

People unfamiliar with the auditing process may believe that if an organization is audited and it came out fine then everything financially must be OK. This is a false assumption. Audits vary in depth and breadth. The simplest audit is simply submission and approval of certain financial documents that meet certain financial criteria. Having a team of professional auditors pouring for weeks or months over every aspect of data on paper and computer is a significantly more thorough audit. There is a middle ground as well of course. Therefore, if a tree-planting foundation touts passing a recent audit, you need a lot more details regarding how thorough the audit is to properly judge its worth.

#### Communication

How easy is it to contact the organization? Are phone calls and emails returned promptly? Do they offer full-time (or by appointment) video-conferencing by Skype, iChat or

another popular service? Ease of contact and the degree of contact offered is an important factor when judging personnel transparency.

#### MEDIUM RED FLAGS:

These relate to not being transparent about 1) advocacy and 2) professional partnerships. Wikipedia.org defines advocacy as: *Advocacy by an individual or by an advocacy group normally aim to influence public-policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions; it may be motivated from moral, ethical or faith principles or simply to protect an asset of interest.* What this means is that an organization can potentially use contribution dollars to promote a cause, political movement or institution that you may not want to support. All nonprofit, tree-planting organizations should always be 100% transparent in regards to any spending that the typical person may construe as either lobbying or not obviously directly related to the mission statement. This should include past, present and planned advocacy/lobbying activities. The dollar amounts given in these areas to precisely what individuals and organizations should be 100% transparent and available. How do you determine the degree of transparency in this area? Telephone the tree-planting organization and ask them for a written presentation of all advocacy efforts and costs involved. Unless they say they have never engaged in such, they should promptly send you the information. If they balk or send you superficial information, there is your red flag.

Professional partnerships refer to individuals or groups that the tree-planting organization may be tied to but hidden. For example, a for-profit company may create a non-profit company with a different name. Superficially, they may be two completely different business entities but the nonprofit company may secretly exist to benefit the for-profit company in various ways. Another area of concern is what is called a 'front group'. The nonprofit may exist seemingly for one purpose but actually has another. Some years ago, there was a nonprofit environmental group that was created by a religious denomination that was anti-environment. Of course, the 'environmental group' raised money and was accepted by the environmental community until its true purpose was exposed – to destroy the environmental movement as a Godless, soulless approach by leftist hippies. Another type of professional partnership relates to when a nonprofit tree-planting organization has inappropriate ties to government agencies. Those ties and connections that directly relate to the mission statement may of course be OK. Other government ties and connections, whether to senior administration or members of the board, may generate corruption, favoritism and other problems. If a nonprofit has any ties to government, such ties should be transparent and communicated in detail without having to be asked first.

#### Counterpoint: Medium Red Flags

Some tree-planting nonprofits will claim that the general public is unqualified to discern if a relationship is ethical or not so why should we bother dutifully presenting our questionable relationships if all they will do is give the wrong impression – leaving us

with less contributions? If our competitor does not do this, they will ‘take’ contributions that would otherwise go towards us. In fact, our competitors may take what we say and distort it to the public so that we will become financially damaged due to a sudden drop in contributions.

The above is not without merit; there are some tree-planting organizations that act duplicitously and unethically. The trade-off is between never being able to learn about inappropriate connections versus legitimate information being misused.

## **INVESTIGATING AND SELECTING A NONPROFIT TREE-PLANTING ORGANIZATION**

Step one is to define what you want with your contribution. Do you want tree seedlings planted or larger sized city trees planted? Do you want the trees planted in the United States or in one or more countries abroad? Does it matter to you if the trees are planted in locations where they may be logged or not? How important is the planting of trees for reducing global warming? Feeding hungry people? Increasing fresh water? Is the planting a memorial tree-planting? Do you want an organization that will endlessly bug you for more contributions via the mail or who sees you as something other than just a money machine? Defining as precisely as possible what you want is the first step to eliminating many of the tree-planting organizations out there.

Once you have a pretty good sense of what you want from your contribution, you need to define which US tree-planting nonprofits fit the bill. A decent Google search allows you to quickly come-up with maybe a dozen or less. Out of the dozen, you eliminate those nonprofits that do not have excellent contact information. Down to ten. Now, you go to [growforests.org](http://growforests.org), [guidestar.org](http://guidestar.org) and [charitynavigator.org](http://charitynavigator.org) to examine those of the ten that are public foundations. Three seem not as financially sound as the others listed so you are down to seven. You carefully examine the seven websites to get a sense of what each nonprofit does and how they do it. Two of the websites seem more appealing than the others so you are down to five. Time for the phone call or email. If they do not answer right away, do you get a quality response within 24 hours? Your goal during the first contact is to get your questions and concerns answered in a way that goes past marketing slogans.

For example, some organizations do a lot for memorial tree-planting contributions whereas others do little. A wood or plastic sign with the contributor’s name nailed on a tree is great for making certain contributors happy but is lousy for the environment. Some organizations have exceptionally beautiful certificates that get mailed-out. Others offer custom letters that includes text provided by the contributor. It is your job to determine which response is most preferred for your memorial contribution. Do not be afraid to shop around.

## **Conclusion**

There are numerous nonprofit reforestation organizations out there. Some are excellent. Many are very good. A bunch are mediocre and a few are miserably bad. It is hoped that this article allows potential and actual contributors to be more discerning as to selecting which ones they should be directing their contributions towards along with what questions to ask these reforestation groups.

## **About the Author**

Michael Thau is the Executive Director of [Plant-It 2020](#), a nonprofit tree-planting foundation. [Plant-It 2020](#) is one of about six US-based, nonprofit, tree-planting foundations that set industry benchmarks. Thau has become the person to talk to in the reforestation industry about both the benchmarks and exceptional activities that certain tree-planting groups manifest as well as the seamier side of the industry. The fact that he is quick to direct business and individuals to those groups that are a ‘better fit’ than Plant-It 2020 can provide, has made him a trustworthy figure in the business community as well as the reforestation industry.

For more about Plant-It 2020, please visit [plantit2020.org](http://plantit2020.org).