

Dirk Brinkman

By David Jordan

Putting down roots

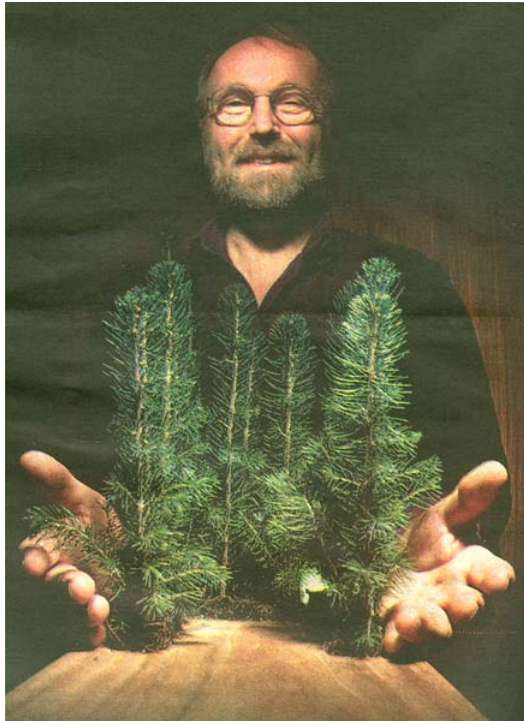
It's a familiar site to anyone who has worked in the bush: a trailer office paneled in dark veneer, a brown and gold carpet worn thin by countless workboots, chairs covered in faded brown burlap. A pair of soiled work gloves sits atop the coffee table.

But this isn't the foreman's office in a remote worksite; it's the New Westminster head office of **Brinkman and Associates Reforestation Ltd.**, the province's biggest reforestation company. And the bearded tree-planter in the faded photograph on the wall is founder and president **Dirk Brinkman** in his not-too-distant past.

Brinkman embodies an uncommon blend of idealist and businessman. Raised in Ontario, he majored in philosophy and mathematics at Michigan's **Calvin Seminary** before heading west for a summer adventure in 1968. When he stopped near Prince George to earn some money falling trees and got stiffed on the paycheque, he decided to go into business for himself. That marked the birth of an industry that in the past 30 years has changed the landscape of B.C.

When Brinkman established a contracting company in 1970 with a partner, **Ted Davis**, tree-planting was just a way to finance their adventures. They would work for three months, then go hiking or kayaking or mountain climbing. But after a few years Brinkman decided it was time to get serious.

"I had an intention at some point to stand still and say this is what I'm going to do," Brinkman said. "I'm going to take my stand here and start to reference everything to this point. As it were, peel



Dirk Brinkman made a commitment to make tree planting his life's work. But the award-winning silviculturist is being forced to take his business to other provinces — and other countries.

the onion of how do things work from the inside out, from centre point, and start to construct a reality that has some integrity and I can work with and shape from a fixed point. I decided to do that with tree-planting in '74 or '75."

The more or less arbitrary choice of occupation would have profound consequences for the B.C. forest industry.

Brinkman was a founding director of the **Western Silviculture Contractors' Association** in 1983, and went on to serve as president from 1985 to 1993. He was president of the national **Canadian Silviculture Association** from 1991 to 1997, and this fall he was recognized by the **Canadian Institute of Forestry** for a lifetime contribution to the industry. In granting the award the association cited not only Brinkman's contribution to

organizing the fledgling silviculture industry, but also his invention of numerous patented tools of the trade, such as planting bags and specialized shovels

After he had decided to take his stand in the B.C. silviculture business, Brinkman became increasingly alarmed at the inefficiency he saw.

When the industry was still in its formative years in the '70s, all reforestation contracts were awarded by the provincial government. The work went to the lowest bidder, which meant that whoever could stick the most seedlings in the ground for the least money got the job. Seedling survival rates were around 59 per cent.

"I had been going back to some blocks five times and each time the trees hadn't survived," Brinkman recalled. "Each time there was an excuse: the nursery had the wrong species or the seed

lots got mixed up. Or else the truck got lost and by the time it arrived the seedlings had heated up and died—but I had to plant them anyway because I had a contract.”

Brinkman knew there had to be a better way.

What are we doing that is really serving our clients?” Brinkman recalled asking himself. “It is putting trees in the ground in a way that allows them to get to their maximum growth performance. Each tree has a growth and performance potential, and we have to do everything to avoid limiting that growth and performance.

“ He was convinced that if forestry companies were responsible for reforestation, it would be in their best interest to award contracts to the company that could do it right the first time.

“ As president of the Western Silviculture Contractors Association, he lobbied the government to hand responsibility for reforestation over to private industry. In 1987 he prevailed; legislation was passed turning silviculture over to the private sector.

Today the survival rate is 97 per cent. And planters don't just set out with a truckload of a single species; they assess the geography of each site and plant a mix of the appropriate species.

Today silviculture is at another crossroads, and Brinkman is bracing for another showdown. This time it isn't tree-planting that's in danger; it's what's known as enhanced silviculture -- the clearing and pruning that must continue for years after the seedlings are planted. Once again the government is exerting its control, and once again

Brinkman is lobbying for change.

All enhanced silviculture on the coast must be done through **New Forest Opportunities**, the hiring arm of the provincial government's **Forest Renewal B.C.** program. And thanks to a collective agreement with the **International Woodworkers' Association**, anyone working through New Forest Opportunities must be a IWA member.

When Brinkman gets an enhanced silviculture contract on the coast, instead of entering a simple agreement with one company, he enters into multiple contracts with the **Ministry of Forests**, New Forest Opportunities, Forest Renewal B.C., the IWA, First Nations, a forestry company and numerous other intermediaries.

“We are so distracted with this horrendously complex set of relationships,” Brinkman said. “You've got all these contractual relationships to deal with. Where's the focus on excellence of forest care?”

With low profit margins and an impossibly complex business climate, no one could blame Brinkman for taking his business elsewhere. And he's doing just that: his company now has two seedling nurseries in Ontario, and a pilot project to plant teak plantations in Costa Rica has exceeded expectations.

But he refuses to walk away from his commitment to B.C. and to the silviculture industry.

“I have to take a position that is utterly committed to continue here because there will be no future for silviculture not only in B.C., but in Canada, if this is how it's done.”

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