

Iseli Nursery will celebrate its 40th anniversary this year. The nursery in the Cascade Mountain foothills is one of Oregon's leading growers of containerized dwarf conifers and Japanese maples, which are available in a rainbow of colors.



# Welcome to OregonGrown Nursery Country

Take a virtual tour of four top-notch nursery and greenhouse operations and see why the world's best plants begin here

## Stories and photos by Curt Kipp

**O**regon is known for many things. The quirky culture of Portland, as seen on the IFC sketch comedy hit *Portlandia*. The most breweries per capita in the country, and great wines from Oregon's wine country. A trendsetting culinary scene, from food carts to fine dining. There's also the powerhouse Oregon Ducks football team, who have become perennial national title contenders, and the rising Portland TrailBlazers, who have flown under the radar while turning into one of the best young teams in the NBA.

For nursery people, it's much the same — Oregon is known for many things. Great soil. A moderate climate with winter dormancy, so many different plants can be grown here. And, of course, an ideal balance of cold-season rain and warm-weather sun.

But those are just Oregon's natural attributes. There's also the remarkable vision that many Oregon growers possess.

Jean Iseli believed in the commercial potential of dwarf conifers. Keith "Ketch" de Kanter believed in the marketing potential in small plants. Devin and Allison Cooper believed in a nursery lifestyle where the customer comes

first. And from a very young age, Brent Markus believed in the value and potential of rare and unusual trees.

These growers invested their sweat, money, time and ingenuity in their respective visions. And with help from Oregon's ideal natural environment for plants and trees, their vision and their ideas became fruitful.

Turn the page and begin to read the stories of some of Oregon's best growers. See how they started with a seed of vision and nurtured it through tough times until it reached full flower. You'll learn, as they did, why Oregon is Nursery Country. ▶



# Iseli Nursery

Almost three decades after Jean Iseli's death, his seminal vision remains vital

**W**hat began nearly four decades ago as one man's dream has become a lasting nursery industry success.

Iseli Nursery has over 100 employees, more than 100 acres of growing space, and an exalted place in Oregon's nursery industry. The nursery's calling card is its display garden, considered one

## Iseli Nursery

**Founded:** 1975 by Jean and André Iseli

**Known for:** Dwarf and unusual conifers, Japanese maples

**30590 S.E. Kelso Road,  
Boring, OR 97009-9594**

**503-663-3822**

**sales@iselinursery.com**

**www.iselinursery.com**

of the finest in Oregon.

The garden is packed with the many dwarf and unusual conifers that Iseli Nursery is known for, as well as Japanese maples and other plants the nursery also sells. Its dazzling year-round looks make a convincing case for the nursery's trademarked slogan, "12 Months of Color.®"

"Walking the three-acre garden in mid-December, it is a very, very alive garden, even though it is the dead of winter," sales manager Jock Demme said.

The nursery's founder and visionary, Jean (pronounced "John") Iseli, was renowned for promoting the idea of dwarf conifers in the landscape. This idea proved to be very influential, inspiring many more growers to begin selling the same material.

"Thirty years ago, if you went to any of the significant horticultural trade shows from the Mississippi River east-



**Jean Iseli**  
PHOTO COURTESY  
OF ISELI NURSERY

ward — MANTS, CENTS, the Mid-Am — there might have been only two or three of us growing conifers,” Demme said. “And of those, we were the only ones presenting many dwarf conifers as part of our offerings.”

Today this material is widely available at retailers across the country.

“He knew somehow that the world of dwarf conifers as a residential landscape material was going to happen,” Demme said. “And he pursued it.”

His other love was Japanese maples. “He was close to equally as passionate about (those). He knew they were terrific garden companions.”

One morning in 1986, while Jean was preparing for a day of work on the nursery, he suddenly passed away at the age of 52.

In 1996, Jean was recognized with induction into the Oregon Nurseries Hall of Fame, an honor that only 19 other individuals to that date had ever achieved. And today, almost three decades after his death, he is still remembered and missed.

“He is the touchstone of this nursery,” said Demme. “He’s been gone since 1986, but notwithstanding, he’s been here every single day since then.”

#### A unique vision

Jean came from a nursery family. His parents moved from Switzerland to the United States when he was a child. Werner and Germaine Iseli had a Portland retail yard at 162nd and Sandy and growing operations in Clackamas County.

But Jean did not train as a nurseryman. He studied mathematics and art while attending Reed College, later graduating from Linfield College. He spent two years of graduate studies at the University of Washington, where he met and married his wife.

Jean was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1959 and did his two years of service in the Washington, D.C. area, working in mathematics and the beginnings of the computer. Once discharged, he stayed in Washington as a computer programmer and worked on the beginnings of the ▶



**Quality Container Grown**

- Ornamental Grasses
- Hardy Perennials
- Broadleaf and Conifers

**Toll Free: 877-843-2155**  
**Fax: 503-843-2232**  
[www.broadmeadnursery.com](http://www.broadmeadnursery.com)  
 8610 Broadmead Rd. \* Amity, Oregon 97101



**ASK ABOUT OUR CUSTOM SOIL BLENDS!**

1275 Bailey Hill Road  
 Eugene, OR 97402  
 Office: 541.342.1835  
 Fax: 541.343.4802



**BARK**  
**BARK FOR CONTAINER MIXES**  
 Various Sizes Available

*Sustainable Solutions*  
 Landscape Community Environment

Contact Rex for pricing at **541.335.8017**  
[www.rexius.com](http://www.rexius.com)

**Using Our Pots Can Also Lift Your Bottom Line!**



**High Quality Competitively Priced Injection-molded Nursery Containers**  
**Sizes #1 - #35**

---

**Call For Information and Free Samples**

  
**Discount Nursery Supplies, LLC.**

**1-877-587-7370**  
**2600 Pringle Road SE**  
**(Salem, OR)**  
[nurserypots@msn.com](mailto:nurserypots@msn.com)  
[www.discountnurserysupplies.com](http://www.discountnurserysupplies.com)

Internet for government contractors.

That's when his brother André told him about a nursery opportunity in Boring. According to Jean's wife Joanne, Jean originally wanted a small nursery growing choice plants.

André and Jean became partners, and together, they purchased Orogreen Nursery in 1975, a defunct growing operation in the Cascade Foothills near Mount Hood. They renamed it Iseli Nursery. After a few years of getting to know local growers who loved dwarf conifers, like John Mitsch, Ed Wood and Dick Bush, Jean caught the bug and attempted to commercialize them.

"Jean was the author of the nursery," Demme said. "André was the finan-

nery was up and running, a bank was persuaded to provide additional financing.

Greg Pilcher, a loan officer with that bank and later an Iseli employee, said, "He had an indomitable personality and a lot of determination. He didn't know you couldn't do it, so he did it."

Jean didn't just spend his time evangelizing. He also spent time learning. He wasn't trained in horticulture, so he consulted expert growers who were willing to share their knowledge.

"He wasn't the first to do these plants, but he was convinced he could make a really nice nursery out of it," Pilcher said. "Iseli had to convince plant sellers to place those plants in their markets. And lo and behold, the plants sold."

retired from it in 1998. The nursery is now owned by Niles Kinerk, who also owns several national horticultural mail order catalogs.

Over the years, Iseli Nursery's focus has remained constant. Many of the key individuals that Jean hired are still working for the company.

Newcomers, meanwhile, are trained in the Iseli way. "Iseli Nursery is about people and plants, and that's it," Pilcher said. "The core at the end of the day is the plants. We fit to the plants. We don't make the plants fit to us."

About 90 percent of Iseli's material is containerized, and the rest is field grown. The containers range in size from 2.5-inch pots on up to 5-foot cedar boxes.

Their customers are plant sellers in

**“Iseli Nursery is about people and plants, and that's it. The core at the end of the day is the plants.”**

GREG PILCHER, ISELI NURSERY

cial partner in the business.”

Part of the difficulty at the time was that growers did not believe dwarf conifers could be produced economically.

"People could get the conifers, but they'd have to get them from collectors or specialty grafters," Demme said. "They weren't grown commercially because they took too long to mature."

Jean's decision to grow them raised more than a few eyebrows.

"(People) thought you couldn't build a nursery based on the premise that there's a market for unusual, slow-growing and dwarf conifers," Demme said. "He knew instinctively that it could be done. There just wasn't a market yet."

So, he set about creating one.

Although he did not have the attributes of a slick marketer, Jean was gifted with an infectious enthusiasm and a tireless energy. He traveled, made phone calls and corresponded prolifically with people from all over the world.

"He was a two-finger typer, but went as fast as anyone types," longtime nursery employee Sandy Dittmar said.

One of his challenges was financing. Bankers generally favor a proven concept, and Iseli Nursery was not that. But after the

Still, headway in the marketplace was very slow. "I'm sure he would be amazed at how the industry has grown," Demme said. "He was right about this genre of plants. Unfortunately, Jean did not live to see how right he was."

### Changes and constants

After Jean's death, the nursery continued on under Jean's widow and André's ownership. One of their first decisions was to complete the three-acre display garden that Jean had started. It was named in his honor.

In the ensuing years, Jean's vision for dwarf conifers in the landscape came into wider acceptance.

"Sometimes, timing is everything, when you consider the way people live, and the houses that have come along in the last 30–40 years," Demme said. "Well-mannered landscape plants are a natural for that, and I think Jean saw that."

Pilcher credits the nursery's sales force for the success of the line. "If Jean wouldn't have had the dedicated salespeople, and the exquisite and unusual plants produced by the Iseli growers, it wouldn't have taken off."

André sold the nursery in 1997 and

the more temperate areas of the country.

One of the most important lessons Jean left behind was never to be satisfied with the plant material in the company's repertoire. "He was always on the search for a new plant that was not just a pretty face, but an improvement — a better plant," Demme said.

The nursery has continued to develop and introduce superior varieties and cultivars, including the Jean Iseli Signature Series of Conifers. One of the most noted selections is 'Jean's Dilly', an improved Alberta spruce that André selected and named for his brother.

Along with continued innovation, Iseli Nursery also remains focused on growing quality plants that stay true to Jean's vision.

"Only the best plants go out," Pilcher said. "We throw away a lot of plants at Iseli Nursery. We have to ship perfect plants. That's what our customers expect of us."

Jean's vision was to create a nursery "Where the beauty of nature meets the artistry of man.®" Those words have become a company trademark.

"As long as people want to make an artistic impression in the garden, there's always going to be a place for Iseli Nursery," Pilcher said. ☺