



Rare Tree Nursery

Fast-rising nurseryman Brent Markus is fueled by a love of conifers and maples



Rare Tree Nursery

Founded: 2007

Principal: Brent Markus

Known for: Rare conifers and Japanese maples

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Brent Markus, owner of Rare Tree Nursery, felt a love of plants and trees from the young age of 12. Today he grows rare conifers and Japanese maples in Oregon while doing landscape design in Chicago and Boston.

If you love Venn diagrams, try this.

Draw a circle that contains all wholesale growers. Then draw another circle that contains all retail nursery owners, and another circle that contains all landscape designers.

In Oregon it's rare — but hardly impossible — to find people who do all three.

But then, where these three circles overlap, draw another circle containing individuals with a local business presence in three U.S. time zones. And then draw another circle inside all of those, containing people who are 32 or younger.

Now we're talking rare.

Brent Markus — the man inside all of these circles — is a rare individual. Perhaps that's why his wholesale nursery is called Rare Tree Nursery. But really, it's the rare plant material he grows: some 700 varieties of dwarf conifers, plus an assortment of Japanese maples.

All of these are grown on his 13-acre farm near Silverton, Oregon, plus a recently acquired 80-acre plot in Canby, Oregon. He then sells them to garden centers and specialty nurseries in the Midwest, the East Coast, and increasingly, the West Coast.

He also sells them through Conifer Kingdom (his retail location on the Silverton farm), and uses them in his landscaping operation that serves customers in Chicago (where he grew up) and Boston (where he resides).

"In the early years, we were producing 8,000–10,000 plants per year," Brent said. "At this point, between dwarf conifers and Japanese maples and rooted cuttings, we're producing about 80,000 plants per year."

Two decades in the making

Brent's interest in rare conifers began in 1994, when he was 12 years old.

"I grew up a mile away from the Chicago Botanic Garden, which had a nice collection of dwarf conifers and Japanese maples," he said. "As a child, I'd tour the garden with my parents on Sundays."

In 1998, his parents decided to remove the large trees and redesign their backyard.

"They hired a traditional landscape architect with a traditionally limited understanding of plant diversity," Brent said.

When that didn't work out, Brent stepped in. "At the encouragement

and expense of my parents, I started a dwarf conifer and Japanese maple collection in their garden," he said.

Before long, while still in high school, he began landscaping for family and friends. At first he sourced his plants from a specialty nursery outside of Chicago. "But I quickly learned the best selection and the best quality came from Oregon," he said.

Initially, he ordered boxes from Stanley and Sons and from Porterhowse Farms. "Two years later, I was receiving partial truckloads," he said.

In 2000, Brent enrolled at Cornell University, the Ivy League school located in upstate New York. He began his studies for a degree in landscape architecture, with a minor in horticulture, and graduated in 2004.

"All those years, I continued to design and supply unusual plant material for a Chicago clientele, using Oregon plant material," Brent said.

He earned his master's degree in horticulture from Cornell University in 2008.

With degrees in hand, Brent wanted to keep landscaping. But he decided the best way to source plant mate- ▶

rial was to grow his own, and the best place was Oregon.

"I think people underplay it, but firstly, the climate makes it easier to grow plants here," he said. "I can grow most woody plant material twice as fast as I could in the Midwest or the East.

"Secondly, there's the skilled labor force. We have a phenomenal population of mostly Hispanic nursery workers who have grown up working for Oregon nurseries. You can't have a nursery pop up in the Midwest and expect to find the same skilled workforce, because you won't."

So, Brent purchased the inventory of Wood's Creek Horticultural in Salem, Oregon, and used it (along with thousands of other plants he brought in) to set up Rare Tree Nursery. He hired the Wood's Creek team, led by Richard Haslebacher, to manage his nursery as well.

As a grower as well as a landscape designer, Brent specializes in unusual and unexpected varieties and colors for the landscape.

"Bringing a designer's perspective to a nursery operation" is what makes him different.

"My landscape design and my wholesale nursery are both rooted in my love for crazy-looking plants," he said.

Brent enjoys showing customers the variety of colors that are available in dwarf conifers. "Many customers have said they've never seen more yellow," he said.

Initially, the nursery was a difficult go. It took three years to grow the



Rare Tree Nursery owner Brent Markus (right) and nursery manager Richard Haslebacher work together to supply customers with quality plants.

material up to saleable size. And that's to say nothing of the bad economy.

"I started a nursery at the worst possible time," Brent said. "In 2007, I thought we were getting out of the tech boom recession, not plunging further into it."

Wholesale sales finally began in 2010, followed by the establishment of the retail Conifer Kingdom in 2012.

"I was never interested in going into retail, but with the tremendous varieties and limited quantities we were producing, it was a logical outlet for selling products that had limited availability," Brent said.

All the while, Brent continued landscaping in the Chicago area, and upon moving to the Boston area, he took on clients there, too.

Expanding for the future

Until very recently, the steady growth of Rare Tree Nursery has been entirely self-financed. "As sales have grown, the nursery has grown," he said. "I've reinvested every dollar the nursery ever made."

The operation began with two employees and now has 10-15, depending on the time of year.

This past fall, Brent took on an investor and acquired the 80-acre Canby farm, which will allow him to expand growing operations dramatically.

"I'm a newbie trying to win over a small piece of the pie, and it hasn't been easy," he said. "That said, there aren't too many growers offering the selection that we have now. If people want to differentiate their garden selection from others in the area, they come to us." ©



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