



Kyle Fessler

**Owner/Operator,
St. Christopher Nursery**

OAN Willamette Chapter's vice president reflects on raising a farm to support his young family

Background: I grew up working summers on the family farm and nursery. In that time, I became acquainted with the many aspects of the nursery life, doing everything from pulling weeds to operating and maintaining equipment. After graduating from Willamette University in 2007, I had the opportunity to start a separate venture with my parents. We started St. Christopher Nursery, growing small fruits and berries. Over the years, we have transitioned into other ornamental and agriculture products in order to diversify our operation.

Guiding principle: Treat everyone as if they are your most important customer. I want to show everyone I work with their value, including employees, vendors, and most important, my family. Without these people, we would not be able to accomplish our goals and have sustained success.

Goal yet to be achieved: I want to build a long-term strategic plan for my business and personal life. Most of our planning the last few

years has been on an annual basis, but the long term is now becoming a higher priority.

Best business decision: When we decided to diversify our operation. On the nursery side, we have focused on short production cycles, which have allowed us to change quickly with fluctuations in the market. We have also invested in other agricultural crops, such as blueberries, hazelnuts and sweet corn, which help maintain stability through market downturns.

Hardest business decision: One of the hardest decisions I had to make was to branch out from the family operation. That decision was extremely difficult because it put the burden completely on me to succeed. In the end, the mistakes I've made have made me a more focused grower and a better businessman.

Greatest missed opportunity: All the small opportunities to spend time with my kids, go fishing, or just plain relax seem to be the ones I missed early on in my career.

Most significant mentor: There have been many mentors throughout the years who have helped me along the way, but none greater than my father, Tom. He taught me early on the importance of quality, integrity and hard work needed to be successful. He has always been the first person I turn to when I have a question about growing, operating or life in general.

Best business advice: Make quality and integrity your primary goal. Quality product will always have a place in the market. Integrity and honesty allow us to build relationships and a reputation that can allow us to compete in the long term.

What do you love most about the nursery industry? The people in the industry. We have great relationships with our "competitors." There are so many nursery people who are willing to collaborate and share information for the benefit of others and the industry as a whole. ▶



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▲ MEET THE LEADER

What is your greatest challenge?

My greatest challenge is labor. It is an ever-increasing cost, and there seems to be a lot more competition for finding and maintaining a quality workforce. We are always on the lookout for new technology and equipment that will make operating more efficient, but there will always be a need for quality employees.

What motivates you to go to work every day?

Being able to provide for my family motivates me. It's also a lot of fun to see which hat I will be wearing on a given day. My role can range anywhere from botanist to economist, or from personnel manager to mechanic, sometimes all in the same day.

What are you most proud of? I'm most proud of my wife Mollie, and the hard work she puts in on the farm and at home raising our three children, Elizabeth (4), Henry (2) and Claire (7 months). I'm also proud that they love living the farm lifestyle as much as I do.

Involvement with OAN: I have been an active member of the Willamette Chapter for several years. I currently serve as vice president and OAN state board representative for the Willamette Chapter. I plan to continue my involvement. I believe OAN is a strong voice for our membership and our industry.

In your opinion, what are the most critical challenges facing the nursery industry today? Minimum wage increases, health care mandates, immigration policy, and public misinformation are all major factors that will continue to put pressure on our ability to compete in the marketplace. We will continue to see increasing regulatory pressure, as well as changing expectations from consumers. Increases in consumer demand for local, organic, non-GMO, and sustainable products is the future we face, and we have to be willing to adapt to the needs of our customers to have success in the long run. ☺

Would you like to be a leader too? Get involved with OAN chapters and committees. If interested, please feel free to contact your chapter president, any OAN board member listed on page 7, or OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone at jstone@oan.org or 503-682-5089.