



New lessons every day

David 'Mac' and Nancy McKinnon, owners of McKinnon Nursery, have no plans to retire anytime soon

McKinnon Nursery

Known for: Topiaries, ornamental grasses, grafted conifers, boxwoods, and other broadleaf shrubs.

Founded: 1986

Owners: David "Mac" and Nancy McKinnon

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By Curt Kipp

You'll probably hear David "Mac" McKinnon's pride and joy long before you see it.

With the turn of the ignition key, his custom 1937 Chevrolet Sedan Delivery rumbles to life. It slowly makes its way out of his garage and down the gravel driveway. The car and its owner are ready for their close-up.

It's not every nurseryman who insists on having his classic car shown in his magazine portrait, alongside the plants. But Mac isn't every nurseryman. "This is me," he said.

Mac built the car from the ground up over the past 12 years with the help of many people (especially Carey Vanderbeck of Vanderbeck Racing).

Although the financial impacts of the Great Recession slowed down production of the vehicle, he never gave up his goal of final completion.

The nursery — Mac's other pride and joy — has a similar history. He and his wife, Nancy, have built it from the ground up, but they had plenty of help along the way. There have been obstacles, but the McKinnons have overcome them. And every mile of the journey has been worth it. Now they get to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

"If I didn't have the nursery, I wouldn't have the car," Mac said.

Growing up

Mac is known for being direct, sometimes blunt, but also kindhearted. He ▶

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credits much of his perspective on life, as well as business, to his upbringing.

“I was raised by a father who was a businessperson,” he said. “He was an authoritarian. He instilled in me a lot of honesty and integrity.”

His father owned an aviation-related business. Mac recalls an incident growing up, when he and his friends were hanging around at the business and goofing around. When Mac’s dad showed up, they all scattered.

“He knew we were up to no good,” Mac said. “He didn’t want us to give him any guff, but he also didn’t want us to hurt ourselves. He’s someone I didn’t always get along with, but I respected what he was trying to do.”

He picked up some of his father’s demeanor.

“I’ll call a spade a spade. But if I’m wrong, I’ll admit it,” Mac said.

In the 1960s Mac became a regular at a restaurant in the rural community of Orient, where he met nurseryman Glen Schaeffer, who owned Schaeffer’s Nursery. They became friends, and Glen became a father figure for Mac and he valued Schaeffer’s advice.

He would eventually follow Glen into the nursery industry — but not right away.

Instead, Mac became what Nancy describes as a “serial entrepreneur.” He owned a series of businesses, including a tavern in Southeast Portland called the Fat Little Rooster. It was in this capacity,



McKinnon Nursery owners David “Mac” McKinnon (center) and Nancy McKinnon pose with employees (left to right) Mario Martinez, Alejandro Martinez and Refugio Nolasco. Also shown: Mac’s 1937 Chevrolet Sedan Delivery, and an assortment of material grown at the nursery.

as tavern owner, that he met Nancy.

“I was working at a place called Photography By Fudge, on Hawthorne Avenue in Portland,” she said. “He had just opened the tavern.”

One day Nancy went to lunch with friends at the tavern and met Mac. Soon, the two were dating, and not long after that, engaged. They married on May 23, 1980 — which they remember well as the Friday after Mt. St. Helens erupted.

While Mac continued to run the tavern, Nancy got a job as a senior financial analyst for the City of Portland. The tavern was known for its blues music, including big local names, such

as Paul deLay, Curtis Salgado and Robert Cray.

After going through bankruptcy and losing the tavern in the 1982 recession, they tried promoting music around the Northwest. They promoted big-name musical acts such as bluesman B.B. King. Later on, Mac worked as a fishing guide before finally becoming a nursery grower, on the advice of Glen Schaeffer, his old friend.

“Nancy and I had bought this piece of property in Gervais, and we didn’t know what we were going to do. Glen said, ‘Why don’t you start a nursery?’”

So they did.

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Starting from scratch

Mac and Nancy founded McKinnon Nursery in 1986, on 10 acres near the northern Willamette Valley town of Gervais. But McKinnon Nursery is a “doing business as” name. For a corporate name, they selected “Big Mac Productions Inc.,” after Mac’s father.

“Nothing we had in our background prepared us for running a nursery, except for my office work with the City of Portland,” Nancy said. “I use the spreadsheet skills I had learned there every day. Everything goes into a spreadsheet.”

Although Mac’s mentor was a B&B grower, the new farm had heavy, clay soils, which were not suitable for that type of production, so the McKinnons produced in containers. With their business established, the McKinnons set about learning everything they could about nurseries.

Oregon growers are typically willing to share what they know, and they did.

As a fishing guide on the Deschutes, Mac took suppliers and his fellow growers on fishing trips, and this allowed him to ask questions and learn from some of the best. They included Bob and Tom Fessler of Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas, J. Frank Schmidt Jr., and fertilizer consultant Tim Lichatowich, who taught him the importance of plant health and nutrition.

According to Mac, the key lesson from the Fesslers was the importance of a clean nursery.

McKinnon Nursery started with 10 acres, and most of the material was green to start with. The emphasis was on mugo pines, Austrian pines and Colorado blue spruce.

As the millennium turned over, the McKinnons introduced more variety into their lineup. They started producing more and more broadleaf color.

To facilitate this expanded product line, they purchased 27 acres of row crop land next door and converted it to containerized production. “That really broadened things out,” Nancy said.

Today, the nursery’s product lineup includes grafted conifers, broadleaf shrubs and ornamental grasses. It is

particularly well known for its sculpted material and topiaries.

The material ships largely to markets in the Midwest and the East. The hardier material goes to the Midwest, and the “foo foo material” — Mac’s term — goes primarily to the Atlantic states.

One unique aspect of McKinnon Nursery is that the irrigation system is fully underground, with storage tanks.

In recent years, Mac and Nancy have tried to learn everything they could about automation, including potting machines and conveyors. Vendors such as Joe Kupillas and Wurdinger Manufacturing have helped them be more productive with the workforce they had. It has been a win-win for the workers as well as the owners.

“We’ve tried to build a fairly state-of-the-art nursery,” Mac said. “Those things really help streamline our business and

make us more aware of our literal cost.”

Perhaps the most important decision Mac and Nancy made was to accelerate production in 2008, just as the economy was entering a nosedive.

Around this time, many growers found they had overproduced in order to meet the demands of the housing bubble. They ended up stuck with material that they could not sell. The McKinnons were not immune.

“He spent more time hauling plants to the dump than anything else,” Nancy said.

Mac and Nancy realized, however, that the eventual end of the recession would present opportunities — and they wanted to be ready. That meant aggressive planting when the economy was at its very worst.

“We said, ‘We’re going to go for it as hard as we can,’” Mac said. ▶

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It was a gutsy call, but their decision worked out.

"It's a hard business. It's not for the weak of heart," Mac said.

"I don't know of another industry where you have to figure out what the trends are going to be four, five, six years in advance," Nancy said.

Not retiring soon

The McKinnons have now been in business for almost 30 years and don't plan to retire anytime soon. They could. They just don't want to.

"I like what I do," Mac said. "I like my crew, I like their families, I like my wife. But I like what I do. We're going to try to go as long as we can."

Loyalty to their 14 year-round employees is also a factor. The McKinnons want to keep providing a place for them to clock in. "A couple have been with us for more than 20 years, and probably two-thirds have been here at least 10 years," Nancy said.

The McKinnons believe in treating their workers like family, and in some cases, they are family. Their workforce includes three married couples, and several other employees who are related to each other.

"My workers are the bomb," Mac said. "They're loyal and hard-working, and they've continued to grow."

The McKinnons have no offspring of their own to pass the nursery along to. Perhaps one day they may sell, but that will be many years away. For now, they continue to enjoy every day on the nursery.

"That's the neat deal about the industry," Mac said. "You continually have to learn, whether it's soil, plants or insecticides. I'm 65, and I learn every day. If you think you know everything, you're in trouble. You really have to have a quality product if you want to compete." ©

Curt Kipp is the director of publications and communications for the Oregon Association of Nurseries, and the editor of Digger magazine. He can be reached at ckipp@oan.org. Follow him on Twitter at @diggermag.