

# Brooks Tree Farm



**Founded:** 1980

**Owned by:** Dave and Kathy LeCompte (pictured above with their daughter, Kim Curtis)

**Known for:** Conifer seedlings and native plants

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**A**S MANY AS 6 million trees per year begin their lives at Brooks Tree Farm, and all of them benefit from the unique growing conditions that are prevalent in western Oregon.

Outstanding Willamette Valley soil. A mild climate with winters cold enough for dormancy, but springs early enough to allow for a long growing season. Available water from rain, irrigation and underground wells. Flat land on the valley floor. And an available community of expert growers.

“The same conditions that make it good for other kinds of plants in Oregon, make it good for ours,” said Kathy LeCompte, who owns the company along with her husband, Dave. “We just have what is needed to grow lots of plant material here in Oregon.”

But the place that Brooks Tree Farm holds in Oregon’s nursery industry is less typical.

Many Oregon growers create finished material for retailers and the landscape trade and sell it either directly to customers or indirectly through brokers. Others grow liners for other nurseries to turn into finished material.

Brooks Tree Farm, however, grows seedlings for Christmas tree farms and timber operations, and native plants for restoration and remediation projects. Some plants are available in containers. The bulk of the seedlings are available as bare root, plugs or both.

Dave noted that other Christmas-tree-

growing states still get their seedlings from Oregon. “The growers in North Carolina are willing to have us grow the trees in Oregon and ship to them, because the quality is so much better,” he said.

The nursery also supplies seedlings to wholesale nurseries that grow commodity or grafted material. These seedlings are used as either liners or rootstock, depending on the tree and the nursery growing it.

In all, the nursery grows close to 50 different species of trees and plants.

“Almost everything we grow has multiple uses,” Kathy said. “We can use it as forest seedlings or Christmas trees. Or we can use it as Christmas trees or ornamentals.”

## Growing up on the farm

Dave and Kathy founded Brooks Tree Farm in 1980, but the story of the nursery goes back much further, to when Kathy was a child. Her parents, Delbert and Barbara Hupp, owned Drakes Crossing Nursery. (Barbara still owns and operates it; Delbert passed away in 2012.)

Like many children who grow up on a family farm, she was put to work as soon as she was able. One of her oldest memories is of picking strawberries. To this day she still associates them with the color red, because that’s how she learned what red was.

“I don’t remember not working,” she said. “I don’t remember not driving (the tractor).” >>

## Brooks Tree Farm

Growing up, she developed the desire to work in the nursery industry. “I was always interested in horticulture,” she said. “I learn it quite easily. It comes naturally to me. But I didn’t have a specific plan.”

After high school, she took hort classes at Oregon State University but did not continue her studies.

“I was told at OSU that there wasn’t a place for me as a woman in the nursery industry,” she said. “I was told I would either need to earn a doctorate or expect to work minimum wage jobs all my life. So, I didn’t stay with my studies. But obviously, they were wrong.”

After she met Dave and they married, the young couple decided to start their own nursery. They purchased a 25-acre farm near the small, rural community of Brooks,

about 10 miles north of Salem.

“We started during a fairly deep recession,” Dave said. “We figured if we could get started then, we could certainly make it when things got better.”

Like Kathy’s parents did with Drakes Crossing Nursery, the LeComptes decided to grow tree seedlings.

“The vision was always to provide some seedlings for Christmas trees, timber and ornamental nurseries,” Kathy said. “My parents had a larger market than they could accommodate, and they were willing to loan us equipment so that we could get started.”

Unlike Kathy, Dave had never worked on a nursery before. He had never even grown a garden, and had spent the prior five years driving trucks for a living. He learned quickly — the alternative wasn’t

an option — and the business grew.

“We doubled every year for the first several years,” Dave said. “But as we became more profitable, we started to look at sandier, lighter weight soils.”

Such soils would be more conducive to field-grown seedlings. They could be harvested much more easily without damaging the roots. In 1990, the LeComptes found property on the banks of the Willamette River, near Salem, that fit the bill.

“Now, all our field-grown seedlings are grown on lighter weight, sandier soils,” Dave said.

In the mid 1990s, Brooks Tree Farm started to produce native plants in addition to seedlings. The customers include government agencies, as well as nonprofits that work together to form buying groups. These include soil and water conservation districts.

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“That’s given us quite a bit of diversity and balance,” Kathy said.

Native plants are not easy to grow or sell, she added. Customers can be highly specific about not just the plant, but its seed source or even the location in which it was grown. “You may have Indian plum, but if it’s not from the seed source or the geographic area they want, they won’t take it,” Kathy said.

Initially they grew the seed they were given by the purchasers. Then, as production needs increased, they started gathering seeds and buying them in from wherever they could find them.

In 1998, the LeComptes purchased additional property in the Cascade mountain foothills, near the town of Silverton. Because it was at a higher elevation of about 1,200 feet, it proved ideal for Noble firs, a key production item for the Christmas tree market.

In subsequent years, the LeComptes purchased or leased additional farms. Today they have about 600 acres available for production, comprised of eight different farms. The plants grown at each farm are carefully chosen based on site conditions.

In 2001, Kathy served as president of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, and is a big supporter of the association. “We see that as so important, because the health of the larger community makes the health of the individual possible,” she said. “We believe that by helping the association, we help ourselves.”

Kathy has continued her involvement on the government relations side of the association, and even ran for the Oregon Legislature in 2010 and 2012.

In 2005, Brooks Tree Farm introduced a new product — seedlings that were grown as plugs, not bare root. They converted their original, 25-acre farm to plug production in greenhouses. This met their customers’ need to save on labor costs.

“Plug production was to give our existing customers the same products in a form that would be easier to handle,” Dave said. “The plugs have been very successful.” >>



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## Brooks Tree Farm

### Built for the future

In today's recovering economic climate, Brooks Tree Farm continues to position itself for the future.

The company is organized in a very lean fashion. Dave is in charge of production. He oversees work crews and logistics at the eight farms. Kathy is in charge of big-picture production decisions and is in charge of sales and shipping.

"I'm an organizational person," Kathy said. "I like the planning and organizing, and I like the management side — and getting out and working with plants."

Their daughter, Kim Curtis, works in the office with Kathy. She's in charge of accounting, bookkeeping and catalog design.

Aside from these three, the company workforce consists of 20 full-time production workers.

A few years ago, the nursery added new packing facilities and offices at its original farm. These allow the company to ship up to 500,000 trees in a day if necessary. The facility includes cold storage for up to 3 million packed trees until it is time for shipment.

The company also added new cold frames for plug production, and may look at electrical upgrades to expand the production capacity at the site.

It's a big decision. On one hand, several direct competitors went out of business during the recession and customer demand for seedlings is consequently very high. These customers, particularly newer nursery operators, are having trouble finding what they need.

"Because this kind of business is so specialized and because appropriate soils and equipment are very expensive, experienced growers know they have to contract our time to get what they want," Kathy said.

On the other hand, the required upgrades to expand further would be quite expensive. "It's such an expensive business to get started in that very few people are willing to do it," Kathy said.

The LeComptes ultimately are guided by an ethic of service — to their customers, to the industry and to the community. ©

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