

Surface Nursery



Founded: 1925 by Melvin Surface

Owned by: Debbie Surface

Known for: Bare-root shade and flowering trees

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IN 1925, MELVIN Surface had a dream in his heart and an ounce of deciduous azalea seeds in his hand. Both grew. And though the azaleas were harvested long ago, Melvin's dream remains.

As a business, Surface Nursery has outlasted the Great Depression, the Second World War, the Cold War and the start of the Computer Age — and after nine decades, it's still going. If you ask current owner and president Debbie Surface why the nursery continues to thrive, her answer boils down to one word: Quality.

"That's the main reason our customers keep returning," she said.

That's the standard that Melvin and his son, Richard, established, and it's the one Surface employees remain dedicated to today.

"We don't want to sell a tree that we wouldn't put in our own yard or nursery," vice president and general manager Graham Anderson said.

The nursery, situated on 300 acres in the Cascade Mountain foothills east of Portland, grows shade and flowering tree liners that are shipped bare root, with a one- or two-year top. These selections include maples, birches, hornbeams, dogwoods, ginkgos, crabapples, oaks, elms and flowering cherry, plum and pear, among many others.

Surface propagates many of its own trees through rooted cuttings and grafting onto purchased rootstock, and grows its own oaks from

seed. For other selections, Surface makes use of tissue culture material, which is free of bacterial and fungal diseases. Surface also offers a variety of Japanese maples that are shipped B&B.

In all, the nursery offers more than 150 different tree selections.

"We sell primarily to other growers," Graham said. "That can be field growers or container growers." These customers are located all across the United States, but primarily in the Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic, the Northeast and the near South (Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina). Many have been buying from Surface Nursery for decades.

Regardless of where these customers are located, or how long they've been buying Surface liners, they all share a common need.

"Our customers need good quality to sell their product, so we have to provide good quality," Graham said. "We're value driven, and want to offer good value for your dollar. Quality at a good price."

Founded in the 1920s

Melvin was freshly graduated from Portland's Benson Polytechnic School in 1925 when he founded the nursery. It took two years for his initial crop of azaleas to be ready for sale.

With the proceeds he purchased five acres of land. Shortly thereafter, he met and married Dona Dempsey. Together, they bought 14 acres

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of nursery property on Stark Street in the then-sleepy community of Gresham, Oregon, about 13 miles east of downtown Portland.

It was on this site that the young couple established a retail and wholesale nursery, which also served as their home.

In 1937, Dona gave birth to a son, Richard, who grew up on the nursery. Back then, horses were still used to prepare the ground for planting and to bring in crops from the fields.

Richard loved to ride his favorite horse to visit friends or pick up groceries at Zim's for his mother. His parents also owned the East Winds Café during his high school days. Selling milkshakes for 35 cents, and steak and fries for \$2.50, made Richard a very popular young man.

By the time Richard reached adulthood, father and son were running the nursery together.

Eventually urbanization took over the area. Melvin and Richard purchased a larger 40-acre site further out in the country, where many large nursery operations, including Surface Nursery, are located today.

Melvin had a long record of industry involvement, including serving a year as president of the Oregon Association of Nurserymen (now the Oregon Association of Nurseries) in 1956. For his many contributions he was made an honorary life member of the OAN in 1977.

Debbie joined the family in 1984 when she married Richard. She still remembers first meeting Melvin. "He was delightful," she said. "He always told a joke and he always gave everyone a silver dollar as a tip. Even if it was for a cup of coffee."

Although over time he ceded more and more responsibility to Richard, Melvin remained involved with the nursery until his passing in 1991.

Richard and Debbie knew the importance of cultivating strong customer relationships. "Richard and I used to go to all those trade shows ourselves," Debbie said. "We used to entertain a lot of our customers at our home. They'd come stay with us even. During the Farwest Show our home was known as the 'Hotel on the Hill.' Personal friendships were formed, >>>

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which increased trust and respect while enjoying time together.”

Richard had a pilot's license and owned a F33A Beechcraft Bonanza airplane that he flew to see customers. He had a hangar at the Sunriver resort community in Central Oregon, as well as a ranch in Joseph, Oregon, near the stunning Willowa Mountains. The Surfaces would entertain guests at both locations.

Many Oregon growers have a strong belief in cooperation within the industry. They believe that what is good for one is good for all. Richard shared this belief and Debbie still does. “We have enjoyed many friendships with fellow nurserymen for generations,” she said. “From sharing bud wood to equipment, we are fortunate to work together.”

Richard passed away in November 2009 at the age of 72. Debbie established a memorial college scholarship in his name for the Joseph Future Farmers of America. Surface Nursery also supports the Horticultural Research Institute at the Gold Circle Endowment Fund level. The Melvin, Dona, Richard and Debra Surface Fund honors them and promotes horticultural research that benefits the nursery and landscape industry.

Carrying on the tradition

Richard's passing left Debbie to carry on the tradition her husband and her father-in-law established. She serves as company owner and president, but leaves most day-

to-day operations to two vice presidents: Graham, who serves as general manager, and Shawn Nerison, who serves as production manager and is in charge of propagation.

“Graham and Shawn are keeping Richard and Melvin alive with the quality trees you see in the field,” Debbie said.

Richard hired and trained Shawn more than 30 years ago. “Though Richard has been gone six years, we still follow his way of doing business,” Shawn said. “We're trying to make sure that same consistency is there.”

This means that no substandard material is shipped. Everything must be of uniform high quality. “It really goes back to the Richard Surface belief and standards,” Shawn said. “It's either black or white. There is no gray. It's either good or it's not.”

Graham came to work for Surface in 1999, after previously working for Baker West Inc. in Donald, Oregon, and Moller's Nursery in Gresham, Oregon. He was proud to join the company and works hard to maintain its established standards. “People will order something at a good price the first time, but if you don't back it up with good quality, they will not reorder,” Graham said.

To grow trees of this quality, it takes dedicated and loyal team members. The company employs more than 40 people during peak season, and many have been serving the company a long time.

“We have two field supervisors, Miguel Olivares and Sam Olivares, who have been

here 35 years and 31 years,” Shawn said. “They were trained by Richard also.”

It is the same with tree grader Bartolo Medina, who has been with the company 29 years. “Company-wide, our average employee has 12 years of service, which speaks to the dedication of our staff and that this is a great place to work,” Graham said.

Don Brookshire of Brookshire and Associates has served as a sales representative for Surface Nursery for more than 40 years. “He's a major contributor to the nursery, and he takes care of his customers, year after year,” Shawn said.

“Our other sales representatives are all skilled sales veterans with many years of nursery experience. They really listen to our customers and have expanded our relationships beyond the Southeast,” Graham said.

The company's passion for the green industry also extends to caring for the environment. Trees are grown using sustainable production methods and cover cropping to protect the soil and keep out weeds. The nursery participates in the StreamCare project offered by the East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District, which allows the planting of native plant material along streams and ponds. This keeps the waterways cleaner and reduces water temperatures, thereby improving habitats for birds, fish and other creatures.

The recent recession put some growers out of business, as housing starts plunged and so did the need for shade and street trees, but Surface Nursery came through it strong.

“One of the keys to our longevity is that we have invested in facilities and equipment in prosperous times, so that in the case of this last recession, we could use the equipment we had,” Graham said. “It was well maintained.”

Things are going better now that the economy is growing again. “Shade trees in particular are short in the market, and that's true throughout the country,” Graham said.

“We've had about four years of nice, increasing sales. We're still getting back to pre-recession sales levels. We're not quite there, but we're on track to get there.” ☺



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