

# Tree Frog Nursery



**Founded:** 1994

**Owned by:** Carson and Colette Lord

**Known for:** Grafted conifers, Japanese maples, topiaries and boxwoods grown in containers and B&B

**Address:** 5445 Forest Ridge Rd. NE, Silverton, OR 97381

**Contact:** 503-873-4191  
info@treefrogtrees.com  
www.treefrogtrees.com

**C**ARSON LORD, the owner of Tree Frog Nursery, believes in taking care of customers.

"A lot of it just comes down to integrity, and doing what's right," he said. "Everyone makes mistakes. It's how you recover that's important. People remember if, at the end of the day, they were taken care of."

The nursery is a hidden gem. Although located at the edge of the highly productive Willamette Valley farming zone, it is tucked away in a small, quiet side valley on a gravel road, where every visiting vehicle kicks up a new cloud of dust.

But not far away is the midsize town of Silverton, home to the showcase Oregon Garden and its namesake resort. This makes Tree Frog an ideal stop coming to or from Silverton. And Carson is always eager to give tours as long as you call ahead.

Tree Frog Nursery offers grafted conifers, Japanese maples, barberries, topiaries and boxwoods. These are shipped primarily in containers with a smattering of B&B-grown material. The bulk of the containers are grown in a pot-in-pot production system, with two sizes offered — #6 and #10 containers.

"For us, the #6s usually will go to cash-

and-carry garden centers or occasionally as liners for other growers, while the #10s are a good transition size, suitable for garden centers or smaller landscape material," Carson said.

The nursery also digs some field-grown material to put in containers for shipment.

Tree Frog's customers are located primarily in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states. "All over, really," Carson said. "We shipped to 20 different states and Canada last year. It's a ridiculously high number for a nursery our size, but I do enjoy the diversification it brings."

In addition to garden centers and landscapers, the nursery also sells to brokers and re-wholesalers.

## Learning the industry

The nursery began in 1994, when Carson was a 19-year-old college student. He and his father, Frank, decided to plant an assortment of grafted conifers on his parents' land.

"It started out as a hobby, as a way to do something productive with the ground we had, and it grew from there," Carson said.

They began with two rows of trees and then went away for spring break. "When we got back, the weeds were all taller than the plants," Carson said. "We had to decide if



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we wanted to have a nursery or not. We got out there with hoes and backpacks of Roundup, and we reclaimed the plants."

Early on, Carson saw the advantages of running a nursery.

"We didn't have hundreds of acres," he said. "Nursery stock was providing a higher yield crop. It was something that could be profitable on smaller acreage."

In the process, Carson found that growing plant material helped scratch an itch that he had always felt. "I had grown up working on farms and wanted to be a farmer, but I didn't have a farm to inherit it," he said.

Early customers included plant brokers, as well as other growers.

"People would come, dig it, buy it, ship it away and send us a check," Carson said. "It was a very different model than it is today. It's a very different level of work."

As Carson learned the business, he relied on knowledge gained from fellow growers. "We leaned heavily on people and asked a lot of questions," he said. "People have been incredibly generous with their time and expertise."

Those offering their advice included Ron Schmidt at Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas, R.J. Tancredi at Alpha Nursery, and David Hicks at Marion Ag Service.

"It's a very good, open, sharing industry in my estimation," Carson said.

While operating the nursery, he continued his college education and then began his working career in the advertising world.

ing industry. Around 2004, four pivotal changes occurred. First of all, Carson purchased his own land — 27 acres next to his parents' property.

Second, he went back to school and earned a master's degree in business administration from George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon.

Third, he introduced pot-in-pot production at his nursery, which means growing containerized material with drip tubes, placed in socket pots in the ground, and drainage pipes underneath to recover excess water.

"It really changed a lot of things for us," Carson said. "It upped our production capability and changed our customer base."

Lastly, he left the advertising world and made nursery work his full-time vocation.

"By that point, we had a lot invested in the operation," Carson said. "Someone needed to be here full time."

In 2007, the nursery purchased additional adjacent property, which proved to be a smart move. It was just before the beginning of the economic downturn, but Tree Frog was able to make small infrastructure improvements over the last several years. The area is finally becoming part of the nursery operation.

"The plan changed from a two-year plan to a nine-year plan, but I'm thrilled we could stick to it," Carson said.

He credits a very lean operation for helping the nursery get through the recession.

"Some of it was just sticking it out," he said. "We never had time to grow fat. We didn't have anything to cut. Nor did we have anything that we had to cut."

During this time, Carson increased his industry involvement by serving on the executive committee of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, including two years as treasurer, and a year as president in 2012. He has also served on the Oregon Garden Foundation board and currently serves on the Oregon State Noxious Weed Board.

### Digging for the future

With the economy in solid recovery, Tree Frog is poised for strong growth.

This fall, Carson and Frank installed a new pot-in-pot production area. Nearby, they installed a new treatment pond to hold recovered water and put in energy-efficient variable frequency drive pumps to feed their irrigation systems.

Carson's reasons for preferring PIP production are many. For one, it meets the stronger demand for containerized material. "That's where the market is," he said.

Second of all, he finds he can be more competitive with containers than B&B, because the latter involves higher freight and labor costs.

Finally, there are spacing issues with field-grown material. "It's troublesome to replant empty holes in a growing field," he said. With PIP, you can replace a sold plant with a new one right away.

The main disadvantage with PIP is that there are far more upfront costs and less margin for error on fertilizer and water. The moisture and nutrients in the surrounding native soil are not available to the plant.

Tree Frog's customers continue to purchase both field-grown and containerized material in strong numbers. That's why the nursery continues to offer both. It is all about taking care of the customer.

"We've been fortunate to have some great customers that have been loyal and have stuck with us," Carson said. "At the end of the day, that's who determines our success." ☈

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