

# Jim Simnitt

**J**IM AND JERRY Simnitt are the tag team of brothers who own and operate Simnitt Nursery. “We run around putting fires out — that’s all we do!” Jim said with a laugh.

Jerry is older — 14 years Jim’s senior, to be exact. When Jim was still a youngster, Jerry was already married, running the nursery with their dad, and well on his way to becoming president of OAN (Jerry served as OAN President in 2012).

Now Simnitt the younger is following in his big brother’s footsteps as he joins the OAN Executive Board as the 2015–16 incoming secretary. And when it comes to business, it’s obvious again the brothers are cut from the same cloth — thanks in great measure to the influence of their dad, Jerry Sr., who started the nursery more than 30 years ago.

“Our dad instilled a strong work ethic in both of us,” Jim said. “He was always the first guy out in the field every morning, the first one to turn on the lights in the morning and last one to turn them off at night — and he’s still that way today!”

**What is on your to-do list today?** January is when it really starts to get going for us again — the trade shows, a lot of harvest and shipping starts in February.

**How did you get into the nursery industry?** I grew up here at the nursery. My dad started it right after I was born. When I was old enough I started helping out and loved it. It’s more of a lifestyle than a



**AGE** 37  
**HOME** Canby, Oregon  
**WORK** Co-owner, Simnitt Nursery  
**OAN** Secretary, Executive Committee; Oregon Nurseries Foundation board member  
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job. My brother (Jerry) helped him get the business going and the two of them had the business for 20 years. When my dad decided to retire, that’s when I stepped into an ownership role.

**How did your family get into the nursery business originally?** My grandfather on my mom’s side came here from Italy. He was a farmer. He came over here to escape poverty, arrived with a dollar in his pocket. He had an uncle in the Portland area who sent for him to help out on his farm. They farmed Parkrose [along the banks of the Columbia River in southeast Portland] before moving down here [to Canby]. When my dad

married my mom, they bought this piece of land here with my grandfather’s help. My other grandfather was budding roses in Portland, and my dad had helped him, so he started growing azaleas. Things slowly progressed from there.

**How has Simnitt Nursery changed over the years?** We were predominantly field-grown flowering shrubs for the longest time, but we’ve always specialized in *Daphne* and various varieties of rhododendrons. Then we switched back to a lot of containerized. We’re about 50/50 now. Our markets have changed too. We’ve been really strong in the East Coast market, but we’re trying to

## MEET THE LEADER

Interview and photo  
by Peter Szymczak

expand that base. There’s more competition among growers on the East Coast: they’re closer to the markets, and what they’re looking for is a little different. Containerized stuff is really big.

### Where do you see your nursery going in the future?

I’d like for us to continue building our reputation as a quality grower of hard-to-grow and niche products. For instance, we’re known for our *Daphne* — not everyone can grow it — and *Daphne* is so cool and wide-ranging. Mezereums are Zone 2 to 3, super hardy and deciduous, not really fragrant but very pretty. And then you have some of the tropical ones that will wilt if you look at them funny — a cold stare will kill them! The stuff we’re growing fits the markets in the Mid-Atlantic states really well, and we really try to tailor a lot of the things we grow to the Pacific Northwest. It’s stuff I like to grow and that fits in my garden at home.

**What’s been your best business decision?** Not growing too fast, and keeping things manageable. We dealt with the downturn by scaling back what we were growing number-wise. We’re more solid and stronger for having lived through it. Now I look at things with an even sharper pencil.

**Where did you get your horticulture education?** Oregon State. I got a degree in horticulture. I worked at a retail nursery in Washington for

## Meet the Leader

a while to see the other side of the business, then I came back here and started working full time. When I first started out, I relied on Jerry a lot, bouncing questions off him and my dad too. I learned a lot from them.

**What's your favorite aspect of the green industry?** It's cliché to say, but it's the people. Whether I'm dealing with customers — they can literally be down the road or across the country — or competitors, there's a positiveness. Everybody is in the same boat; everybody helps each other out.

Our business is to nurture things along, whether you're in propagation or finished

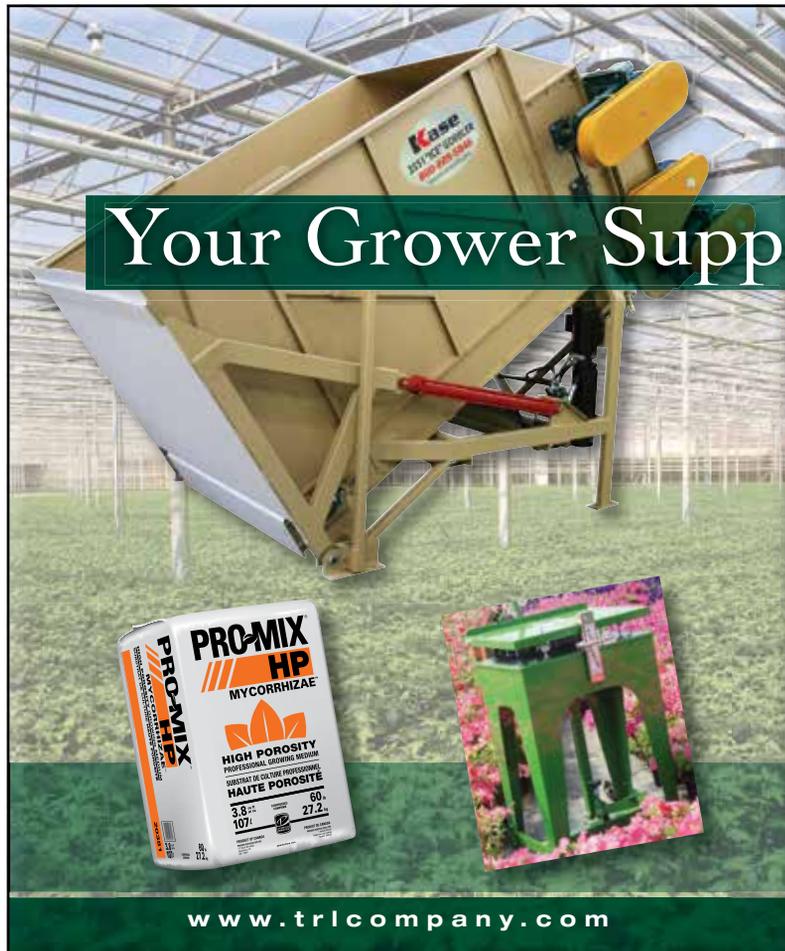
stock, you nurture these plants along for months and years. You have a special relationship with the plants. You've put a lot of time and effort into your product. When we load a truck, we put a lot of personal pride in it. Those are our plants, and when people get it, that's what they're getting — a part of you. It's personal.

The other thing I like is it's seasonal. You've got spring, which is crazy. You work really hard: it's long hours, but it's fun. You're digging and loading, pulling orders ... summer, fall and winter are all different. Every day you go to work, it's different. You're always dealing with weather. Plants grow differently from

year to year. That's where the art comes into it.

**The art?** Well, one of my greatest challenges is trying to figure out what plants are going to be wanted in four years, which is about the time of our growing cycle. What does the end consumer want, what will be the trends in four years? We make our decisions based on historical data, but also what we like. When I walk through my garden or a retail garden center, I'm looking for what draws the eye. How do I get a plant that will draw a customer's eyes — not just the newest thing, but how can we grow it better to make it more desirable?

**What other challenges face the industry today?** Getting new blood. That's actually why I got involved with the Oregon Nursery Foundation. I received an ONF scholarship when I was a student, so I wanted to see it from the other side and help students who need financial aid. We also need to educate people about the opportunities that exist in the industry. Kids need to understand this is a viable — and good — way to make a living. And of course, so much is unknown about the availability and cost of labor. We can have all the great ideas about what and how we want to grow, but will we be able to do it? ☺



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