

Tsugawa Nursery



BY CURT KIPP



Founded: 1981

Known for: General garden center offerings, Asian plants and décor, water plants and Japanese-style landscaping.

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An estimated 100,000 freeway drivers pass Tsugawa Nursery daily as they travel through Woodland, Washington, but it's the quality of their offerings that has made the retailer a regional landmark.

PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

FOR NEARLY 35 years, Tsugawa Nursery has been one of the top garden centers in Southwest Washington.

Situated along busy Interstate 5 in Woodland, about halfway between Vancouver and the Longview/Kelso area, it is able to draw in garden enthusiasts from a 20-mile radius, plus Portland. An estimated 100,000 drivers pass the nursery daily.

"I-5 has definitely helped us," general manager Brian Tsugawa said. "You've got to have that curb appeal."

The nursery, though well rounded in its quality offerings, is best known for its emphasis on Asian plants and décor. That includes Japanese maple, bonsai, bamboo, water plants, koi ponds and Japanese style landscaping. Every spring, the nursery also sells fresh berries grown by the Tsugawas. The entire nursery takes up 4 acres, plus a 1-acre parking lot for the customers and occasional tour buses stopping by.

Brian operates the nursery with help from his family, drawing upon lessons taught by his parents, George and Mable Tsugawa, who founded the nursery in 1981.

"My mom always listened to the customers," Brian said. "Being on the floor and adapting to the changes is where it's at, or you'll be restricted in your growth. You can't base things on your own likes and dislikes."

Although Mable passed away in 2011, George still helps with the nursery at the age of

94. He was recognized in 2013 as Woodland's Citizen of the Year. Brian said his father taught him "the good old grass roots of work hard, and work harder."

"No waste," Brian said. "Every little penny does matter."

Overcoming obstacles

The story of the Tsugawa family in America began in the early 1900s, when George's father immigrated from Japan in search of a better life.

"He didn't know a word of English," George said. "In a short time, he learned how to read and write English."

Once settled, he sent for a picture bride from his native Japan. This was a common practice at the time for Japanese immigrants to the West Coast. Grooms sent a picture back home and were matched to brides by family members, usually with the aid of a matchmaker.

In 1921, George was born. He remembers growing up in the Hillsboro, Oregon schools as one of just three Asian students. "We were all friends," he said. "We are all still living. I'm 94, one is 95 and the oldest is 96."

Among them was Art Iwasaki, one of three brothers who operated Iwasaki Bros. Inc. wholesale growers along with their father, B.Y. (Billy).

George graduated from Hillsboro High School in 1939 — just a few years before the Japanese Imperial Navy bombed the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December

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Brian Tsugawa (right), general manager of Tsugawa Nursery, credits his father, George (left), for teaching lessons of hard work and perseverance. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

7, 1941, drawing the United States into World War II.

Shortly thereafter, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, calling for the placement of Japanese living on the West Coast into internment camps. Some 120,000 Japanese Americans — comprised of Isei (first generation immigrants) and Nisei (their children) — were detained.

Although the Isei could not become citizens by U.S. law, the Nisei and their children (Sansei, meaning third generation) were American citizens. Regardless, all were told to quickly pack whatever they could carry and abandon their homes, farms, jobs and businesses. The Tsugawas were forced to abandon the roadside fruit stand where they earned their living.

“Whatever they told us to do, we did it,” George said.

They were herded onto boxcars, destination unknown. “They didn’t want us to



know where we were going,” George said. “We were shoved in like sardines.”

They arrived at the Minidoka War Relocation Center, which was situated in Idaho near the city of Twin Falls. The camp, which operated from 1942–1945, swelled with some 9,397 Japanese American inhabitants, mostly from Oregon, Washington and Alaska.

“It was probably the second-largest city in Idaho, overnight,” George said.

The detainees lived in a structure resembling an army barracks. There was a wall around the perimeter of the camp. “There were four machine gun towers there,” George said. “If you don’t think that’s quite a reception ...”

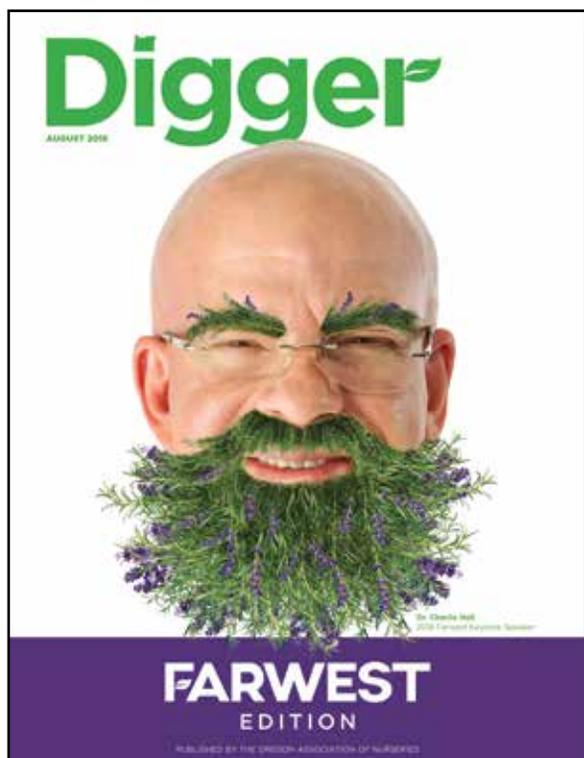
According to George, the authorities at Minidoka eventually realized that the incarcerated were not going to “blow up the place.” “They began to trust us,” he said.

They asked captives of fighting age to join the U.S. Army; they were needed to fight on the European front. “A lot of guys did,” George said, aware of the irony.

George and his family were allowed to leave the camp in 1944 because his mother was dying of cancer. (His father had passed away before the internment.)

“But they never gave back a nickel of what they took from us,” George said.

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It wasn't until 1988 that the interned, or their heirs, received reparations. The 1988 Civil Liberties Act apologized for the internment and authorized a payment of \$20,000 to each individual camp survivor. The legislation admitted that government actions were based on "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership."

After the war

Following the war, George returned to the Portland area. It was here that he met Mable Taniguchi, also an internment survivor (at a different camp: Tule Lake, California). After dating for a year, they married in 1950.

They decided to move to Woodland in 1957 and start a berry farm with George's brother, Henry. "We put everything we owned into an old dump truck," George said.

The family leased a farm on 50 acres with two houses and irrigation. It had been on the market for \$33,000, with no takers.

"My wonder was, how are we going to be received in Woodland? They had just finished fighting the Japanese," George said. "It was rough at first, but in time we were accepted in the community."

They grew horseradish, cucumbers, strawberries and raspberries. "We tried anything that grew. Anything there might be a market for," George said. "I told Mable, 'Don't get too comfortable. We're not going to be here for too many years.' We've been here for 59 years now."

The Tsugawas raised their family of six children, while their berry and vegetable farming business eventually grew to some 200 acres at its peak.

A turning point came with the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980. The ash plume from the May 18 eruption blew to the east, sparing the farm of any ashfall. But a week later, on May 25, the Tsugawas weren't so lucky. This time when the volcano blew, the winds were blowing to the west. The volcanic ash fell on and ruined the Tsugawas' ripening strawberry crop. "It coated them," George said.

The couple had recently purchased an old retail nursery property along Interstate 5 that had been shuttered. "My wife >>



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said, 'Let's start up a nursery,'" George said. "We had no idea what nurseries were all about. She thought we'd have to put a few plants out there and that would be it."

There were frustrations in those early years. One day, Mable sold just one plant — a geranium for \$1.25. But she didn't quit.

"My wife really put her heart and soul into the nursery to get it off the ground," George said. "She tried all different kinds of things."

Brian remembers being unsure of the venture, but he left his job as a produce manager at the local Thriftway to help with his family's new business. "It was all a learning curve," he said.

It took years for the business to gain strength. "I'd say the first five years was (difficult)," Brian said. "I don't know that I'd want to do it again. It was very seasonal."

But soon, the greater Vancouver area began to grow with a vengeance, helping the nursery take off. With every year, the Tsugawas became more successful while learning how to run a garden center together.

They reinvested in the business, purchasing an adjacent house and turning it into the nursery office. The backyard pool became a water garden with koi in it. They also began their own production of nursery material, a building a 4-acre nursery with six greenhouses and eight cold frames. Their berry business is also still going, but it is now down to about 50 acres.

Brian is a believer of investing in the business, but not in "living large." That belief paid off during the recent recession, when sales slowed down. When recovery came, the business was in strong position to take advantage.

Now things are going well again, and more growth is forecast in the Woodland area. It's becoming a bedroom community for the Vancouver area, and the forthcoming Cowlitz Tribe casino five miles to the south is also expected to help the local economy.

There are many reasons to love running a nursery, but for Brian, seeing customers succeed is the best part of the job.

"You have to love what you do," he said. "The rewards are seeing customers coming back. The glory is in the customers." ©