

J Farms LLC

BY CURT KIPP

MEMBER PROFILE



Founded:
2006 by Jenni Burkhead
and Jim Lewis

Known for:
Custom propagation of
unique conifers and
Japanese maples

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J Farms LLC in
Amity, Oregon, offers
a variety of unique
grafted conifer seedlings.
PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

FOR SOME, OWNING a nursery is a business. But for Jenni Burkhead and Jim Lewis, the owners of J Farms, it's a lifestyle — one where the nursery is their home, their employees are like family, and their customers and even their competitors are friends.

"In our view, we don't have competitors," Jenni said. "A number of them do the same things as we do, but we're all in this business together."

"A lot of our friends are in the industry," Jim said. "We live it."

J Farms offers custom-grown liners, comprised mostly of grafted conifers. All orders are taken one year ahead of time.

By Jenni's estimate, conifers make up 90 percent of the nursery's volume. The other 10 percent includes Japanese maples (5 percent) and other deciduous trees such as dwarf ginkgo.

Jenni describes the nursery's offerings as "underused but not collector type conifers," in "improved forms and colors" that "fit the landscape." Among their offerings is *Pinus sylvestris* 'Green Penguin', a slow-growing, cone-shaped tree, which Jim selected more than a decade ago, out of a block of Scotch pines. It was featured in the New Varieties Showcase in 2011, where it won People's Choice for best tree or conifer. Since then, demand has grown.



"It's a perfect pine for the modern landscape in many hardiness zones, because it will never overgrow your space," Jenni said. "And for the grower, it's a very easy plant to grow."

Other big sellers for the nursery include *Picea pungens* 'Hoopsii', *P. glauca* 'Pendula', *P. abies* 'Paul's Select' and 'Cupressina' on Norway spruce, and *P. pungens* 'Glauca Globosa' on standard.

For J Farms, most customers are fellow growers, with the majority located in the Willamette Valley. Jim and Jenni are invested in their customers' success, making efforts to match them to cultivars that fit their markets and growing cycles.

"It's important that we have a real close understanding," Jenni said. "Our customer is not the type that looks at a list and orders" ➤

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from it. We're more of a grafting partner for our growers. We provide a real consistent product so they can maintain their cycles as they like."

J Farms tends to specialize in material that is more difficult to graft.

"Grafting is a lost art," Jenni said. "If I were going to bring somebody up in the industry who was really wanting to have a secure employment, I would teach them how to graft. These skilled workers aren't around anymore. And it takes years to learn."

J Farms begins by using seedlings from timber suppliers as their rootstock. Each spring, about 70,000 plugs arrive on the nursery. They are hand-potted and grown until November. Beginning around November 15, nursery workers start grafting scion wood onto the rootstock. This process lasts until April, when the finished liners are cleaned to ship late June through August and the cycle begins again.

The nursery's Japanese maples are grown on a different schedule. They are grafted over the summer and ship the following April.

Jim and Jenni talk to customers about each cultivar's specific care requirements. "We take the time to go over all the production quirks and offer marketing information so they'll be successful," Jenni said.

The roots of a dream

Although most of their material is grown on recently-germinated conifer plugs, the roots of J Farms actually run deep — and stretch for quite some distance, from the Upper Midwest to Germany.

Jim grew up in Nebraska, then attended the University of Minnesota, where he earned a bachelor of science degree in horticulture and nursery management. Jenni grew up in Kansas and earned a bachelor's degree in horticultural therapy from Kansas State University.

Both of their careers took them to Oregon, which led to their eventual meeting. Jim was working for Oregon Pride Nursery in McMinnville when he took a tour at Van Belle Nursery in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Jenni was working for them as

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Jim Lewis and Jenni Burkhead, longtime veterans of the Oregon nursery industry, acquired Jeddelloh Farms and established J Farms about a decade ago. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP



an Oregon-based salesperson and ended up serving as Jim's tour guide that day.

The two continued to work for different nurseries (and at times, the same nursery) in Oregon. Jenni was working as an independent sales consultant for several Oregon nurseries. One was Jeddelloh Farms, a grower of unique conifer varieties.

Then-owners Horst and Linda Jeddelloh were famous for their large collection of conifers from Germany and elsewhere. Horst and Linda are related to the German Jeddelloh family of Zu Jeddelloh Pflanzen fame, who have been farming the same land for 15 generations and had been engaged in the nursery trade since 1932.

One evening, after Jenni had been selling their plants for several years, Horst and Linda invited Jim and Jenni over for dinner and made an announcement — that they were retiring, and wanted to sell the business to Jim and Jenni so that it could continue. The offer was quickly accepted. The customer base continued to receive the same product and service it was accustomed to.

“They had built this wonderful palette

of what Linda coined — and I use it today — ‘production worthy conifers,’” Jenni said. “And that’s what sets you apart from the collector conifers. You can make money more quickly on these conifers.”

Jim and Jenni established J Farms in 2006 on rented property near Dayton, Oregon, and began growing. They hired Jeddelloh Farms head grafter Alfredo Martinez and made him a key member of their team.


Two years later, they purchased acreage and a home on five acres on the outskirts of Amity, Oregon, using financing through the USDA and FSA Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Loans program. There, they established a scion field to supply scion wood for their grafts.

In addition to the Jeddelloh selections, they added varieties acquired from other Oregon growers and through their membership in the American Conifer Society.

“The wonderful thing about Oregon nurseries is, everyone is really open to helping you with conifer scion,” Jenni said. “You have to develop that relationship.”

It’s taken time for the scion field to >>

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grow up to the necessary size for production needs. "We just now can support our grafting numbers, after eight years," Jenni said.

Times were initially lean. They moved onto the new property just as the Great Recession was getting underway in earnest. Jim and Jenni cut their production and let everyone go except for Alfredo. "We just did what it took," Jenni said.

Jim and Jenni credit the advice their received from the Jeddellohs for helping them survive the rough economic times.

"They were wonderful mentors in just teaching us how to keep it simple," Jenni said. "We may wish we had more automation and more equipment, but their philosophy of keeping it simple kept us afloat."

It also helped that the two, between them, had experience in most aspects of operating a nursery. They just hadn't been nursery owners before. That's where assistance from Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon, came in.

For the past six years, Jenni has been taking classes from Chemeketa's AgriBusiness Management program. Faculty members Phil LaVine and Dave Sunderland act as instructors as well as consultants for the farmers who are enrolled.

Jenni highly recommends the program and said the knowledge she has gained about her business, and farming in general, has been invaluable.

"This was a late education for me," Jenni said. "Having your own business is so possible for anybody who wants to do this. There are so many resources out there."

Now, she would like to help others achieve the same dream. She plans to reach out to universities and offer internship opportunities. Eventually she and Jim would like to mentor someone to carry on the legacy of J Farms.

"We (as an industry) need to do a better job teaching the younger population this is a very interesting and satisfying career," she said. ☺

Curt Kipp is the director of publications and communications at the Oregon Association of Nurseries and editor of Digger. He can be reached at ckipp@oan.org or 503-582-2008.