

Highland Meadow Nursery Inc.



Founded: 1995 by owner Dan Staley

Container, pot-in-pot and field-grown nursery on 65 acres

Other key people: Operations Manager Gary Grant; Production Manager Trent Staley; Production Supervisor Austreberto "Bert" Delgado; Office Manager Becky Schatz. Averages 30-35 employees during the year.

Known for: Variety of plant material

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WHEN DAN STALEY founded Highland Meadow Nursery in 1995, his plan was to create a nursery on 40 acres that he would be comfortable operating on his own.

Some 21 years later, Dan has a 65-acre nursery that employs about 35. "It wasn't part of the business plan to become this size, or be as intense as this has become," he said.

Dan grows a wide variety of plant material, from trees to shrubs to perennials. It's all material that he grows on demand. Whatever customers need, he will grow it if the arrangement makes mutual sense. It has ranged from an annual order of three truckloads of one variety and one size all shipped the same day, to an order that will be drawn from and shipped throughout the year (full loads) of 10-15 assorted quantities and sizes.

"You hear this phrase 'partner up with somebody' and it's overstated," Dan said. "But it's the best description of who we are and what we try to do. You have to link up with people who have needs. You have to be upfront and honest. We'll do whatever somebody needs and the two of us can make money at."

It's a collaborative relationship. Dan frequently shares production plans with the customers he sells to.

Highland Meadow is highly diversified. The nursery grows material in containers, pot-in-pot, conventional greenhouses, gutter-connect greenhouses, retractable shade houses and liner houses. The

nursery's customers include re-wholesalers, retailers and other growers. The material includes trees, shrubs and even perennials.

But even in spite of the variety of customers, plant types and production methods, Highland Meadow somehow manages to self-propagate about 80-85 percent of the material that it sells.

"It may appear to be a little helter-skelter, but there is a method to the madness, so to speak," Dan said.

Customers are predominantly located in the intermountain area (Utah, Idaho, Nevada) and the Upper Midwest, mostly Minnesota. The rest (about 20 percent) are scattered throughout the country.

More than just a job

Although many nursery owners have a family background in horticulture or farming, Dan grew up in the city. He was one of 11 brothers and sisters living in a suburb of Salt Lake City. It was a tough neighborhood, and his family wasn't well to do.

"We all got along, but we just muddled through life," he said.

His initial jobs working on a garbage route and in construction taught him what he wanted out of life — as well as what he didn't.

"I was young, and I was ready to get married and start a family," he said. "I wanted a career and not a job."

Above all, he wanted to live a life that portrayed personal responsibility to others and family.

He was recruited to join a one-year

ornamental horticulture program at Utah State University. "They asked me to come out and join the program, so I did," Dan said.

The program, then in just its second year, involved two semesters of classes and labs and a one-semester internship. The curriculum included all aspects of running a nursery, from budgeting to greenhouse construction to small engine repair.

"None of us were your typical college students," Dan said. "Some were more normal than others, but it wasn't a group for the overachievers, for sure."

Upon completing the program, Dan was enthusiastic about horticulture and went looking for his first nursery job. "I was fortunate that in 1973 I went to work with a nursery company in the Salt Lake City area," he said.

Porter-Walton Company was a large, family-owned supplier of hard goods and green goods, serving the intermountain area east of the Cascades and west of the Rockies.

"From that time until today, I've seen lots of changes. I've been fortunate to be exposed to all kinds of opportunity," Dan said. "I've been able to learn from every phase of that."

In 1976, the company went national. In 1980, they expanded by purchasing a nursery in Oregon. They asked Dan to head up the operation.

The first half of the 1980s were tough times in the industry and in 1985, the company sold off the green side of the business to a competitor based in Salt Lake City. Dan moved back to the corporate office in

Utah for a time, then back to Oregon to be responsible for the Oregon operations.

In 1989, Jim Fisher bought the 60-acre site Dan had helped set up for his employer. Dan became an employee of Fisher Farms and helped Jim fold the two sites together.

Throughout all of these work experiences in Utah and in Oregon, Dan learned a great deal from a series of employers and mentors. He melded together bits and pieces of knowledge that he acquired to become the nursery professional he is today.

"I've been fortunate they were all good people," he said. "They turned out to be ethical, concerned for the people who were their employees and customers. They taught me a lot."

Building a dream

While still with Fisher, Dan set the wheels in motion to start Highland Meadow. He conceived the idea in 1994. "I was still working at the Sherwood location of Fisher Farms while doing this," he said.

He launched his own nursery in 1995 and continued at Fisher. "At the time, we started it as a part-time, evening, weekend type deal," he said. "We started fairly small."

Part of that was out of necessity. Dan had a master plan for the site, but had to put it in place gradually. "We had no money, so we had to grow incrementally, whether we wanted to or not," he said. "We had to do it as we could pay for it."

But by 2000, Dan felt that both operations needed his full attention. He resigned at Fisher Farms and made Highland Meadow his full-time job. The nursery continued to grow through the boom years of the early 2000s. In 2004, Dan purchased an adjacent 25 acres for future expansion. By 2007, he was ready to use them.

"We said, 'We need to go to Stage Two,'" Dan said. "When we discovered that there was no possibility to creatively squeak any more production out of the original 40 acres we decided to go to the next level. The next level wasn't just simply adding production acreage but it

required us to reassess the entire operation, making sure to allow for each segment of the business to have the proper assets in order to balance them for the maximum efficiency."

Although this was right before the Great Recession began, the timing worked out because it situated Highland Meadow for the ensuing recovery.

"We started to develop it when we were still in the midst of the hard times," Dan said. "People have told us, 'You were smart to develop when no one else was.'"

The expansion is just now being completed, giving Highland Meadows an expanded production capacity to serve customers. "It's a lot bigger than I ever looked to do," he said. "It's bigger in all ways."

Dan's principles of nursery production are to synchronize, simplify and streamline.

"What we're really trying to be is value. Our focus is to consistently be a true value to those we're working with," he said. "The trick is to manage it."

It's an industry Dan loves to work in.

"It's a really unique industry," he said. "No two operations are alike, and no two days are alike within one operation. There's nothing like it that I know of. The industry, while it competes with each other, remains supportive and cares about each other. I think they do. There's more than respect in the industry; there's genuine concern."

As a nursery owner, Dan's hope is to provide employees with the same sort of opportunity and mentorship that benefited him when he was younger.

"Give people the opportunity, the tools and the authority, and let them go to work," he said. "When people are given challenges, if they're the right person, they're going to feed off of it."

After all, that's what Dan did. And every day, he comes to work feeling grateful for the opportunities he received.

"It's been a great ride, and nothing because of me, but I've been able to withstand it," he said. "You've got to do what makes you happy. People don't understand that. Money is a big issue, but it's not the only issue." ©



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