



Pacific Nursery Inc.

Founded: 1984 by Gary Brooks

Pot-in-pot, container and bare-root tree nursery on 61 acres

Owner: Darin Cox

Other key personnel: Production planner Gary Brooks; office manager Vicki Yonally; production manager Felipe Lopez

Employees: 14-28, depending on season

Known for: Japanese maples, grafted conifers and shade trees

Contact: 9200 S.E. Lafayette Hwy., Dayton, OR 97114
503-864-4080
info@pacificnursery.com
www.pacificnursery.com

DARIN COX AND Gary Brooks may be 41 years apart in age, but when it comes to having a passion for nursery production, they are kindred spirits.

“We work really, really hard at quality and consistency,” Brooks said. “Our customers don’t have to worry about what they will see when they open the back door of the semi.”

Brooks, 80, founded Pacific Nursery Inc. in 1984 at the age of 48. In July, he sold the nursery to Cox, 39, who has been working with him for the last 16 years.

“I like growing plants,” Cox said. “It’s rewarding when we graft a crop of Japanese maples or harvest a crop of two-year top trees and they’re as close to perfect as you can get. I like to be outside, and I don’t mind hard work.”

Despite the sale, Brooks has not retired. He has cut his schedule to three and a half days per week, but still plays a key role at the nursery as production planner.

“I’m not going to go anywhere soon,” Brooks said. “It’s kind of my life. For a guy that’s been around forever, he is only there for one reason — because he loves to go to work.”

Pacific Nursery is headquartered on 41 acres in the western Willamette Valley near the small communities of

Dayton and Lafayette and the larger city of McMinnville, Oregon. The nursery has another 20 acres nearby for growing bare-root trees.

Pacific grows Japanese maples and shade and flowering trees using a variety of production methods — container, pot-in-pot and bare root. The Japanese maples are sold to customers on the East Coast, in the Southeast, and in eastern Canada. The shade and flowering trees, on the other hand, are sold to customers closer to home in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico.

“Most of our product goes to re-wholesalers, folks that distribute to garden centers and landscape contractors,” Cox said.

Pacific grows its own seedlings and grafts its own maples. “We’re completely in-house on the Japanese maple side,” Cox said.

Because the nursery is located in Western Oregon, where the climate is ideal for growing trees, Cox feels well positioned to meet customer demands for a consistent supply of quality material.

“We’re spoiled here,” he said. “We can grow just about anything compared to other parts of the country. We’re lucky in that regard.”

Strong roots in the industry

Brooks is part of the Brooks family

that founded Carlton Nursery, one of the anchors of the Oregon nursery industry. Four members of that family are in the Oregon Nurseries’ Hall of Fame due to their industry-wide impact and influence, including Gary’s father (Kent Brooks) and his uncles (Gene, Lyle and Lynn Brooks).

At the age of 14 Brooks started in the nursery industry by wrapping buds at the family farm, which was then located in Forest Grove, Oregon. But in 1957, at the age of 21, Brooks struck out on his own. He founded his own landscaping company, which he operated for 15 years.

In 1971, he partnered with Dave and Charlotte Cox to form Specialty Trees Inc., a specimen shade tree nursery. One year later, Brooks returned home to Carlton Nursery. He continued to work with Specialty Trees Inc. on the weekends.

In 1979, Brooks and the Coxes sold Specialty Trees to EF Nursery while the property was sold to Jim Fisher and became part of Fisher Farms. Brooks continued with Carlton Nursery until 1983, when the nursery was sold to Gordon Bailey, who renamed it as Carlton Plants.

Upon leaving Carlton, a large nursery operation, Brooks decided he wanted to experience something different.

“I knew so many people in the industry,” he said. “I wanted to know what

would work on a small nursery operation. I didn't want a large business. I wanted to keep it simple."

In 1984, Brooks leased two acres of ground in Amity, Oregon, and started production on liners. Two years later, he purchased a 28-acre site near Dayton, Oregon, as the nursery's permanent home and began turning the liners into finished trees. (This site was recently expanded by another 13 acres.)

One of the first market sectors he targeted was containerized Japanese maples.

"If you went to the East Coast, you found nothing but large, B&B Japanese maples," Brooks said. "People said, 'Maybe I'd like to get a little smaller Japanese maple in a container. It would be a smaller price point. It would be more affordable.'"

These trees had several additional advantages: They could be shipped all year, they were lighter, and more trees would fit on a truck. Unfortunately, it was difficult to give the containerized Acer palmatums the specimen-like appearance that customers preferred.

"I had a difficult time getting a field-grown look," Brooks said. "Everyone was used to B&B. My maples were light so I changed my production methods. We are now able to come close to a field-grown look with our maples."

In 1995, Brooks added other containerized shade and flowering trees to his lineup, but as with the Japanese maples, the wind was blowing over the containers. "We had to pick them up every day," he said.

Around that time he heard about a nursery in South Carolina using a new production method called "pot-in-pot." This involved placing the potted trees into a second container, referred to as a socket pot, which was embedded in the ground. This held the tree in place and eliminated blow-over.

Brooks was intrigued by the idea, and in 1997, he became one of the first nursery producers to bring pot-in-pot production to Oregon. Soon other Oregon growers were asking him how to do it successfully — information that he gladly shared.

A new generation

In 2000, future owner Darin Cox joined Pacific Nursery. Cox had grown up in the nursery industry with both of his parents (Dave and Charlotte) working at Carlton. Naturally, he became interested in horticulture and decided to pursue it.

"When I was in high school, I worked in garden centers and at Christmas tree farms," Cox said.

He went to college at Oregon State University and earned a Bachelor of Science in Horticulture. During the course of his studies, Brooks — who had known him since he was a little guy — invited him to intern at Pacific. The experience was positive, and upon graduation in 2000, Darin didn't have to look far for a job.

"Gary offered me a job to come work for him and I accepted," Cox said. "I didn't want to be slotted into one part of a nursery. I wanted the whole scope. And that's what Gary was offering."

Cox initially gained valuable work experience in nursery production. That experience proved to be crucial as he transitioned to general/sales manager of the nursery and then owner/operator.

"With a business like this it's real easy for me to be in the sales end of the nursery one minute and the production end the next," he said. "We all wear many hats."

When Brooks was ready to sell the nursery, it was only logical that he would sell to Cox. "He's been the general manager and the sales manager, and he has a

firm grasp of the production side of the business," Brooks said.

With Brooks remaining on board, the two will continue to work hard to achieve a high standard in nursery production.

Pacific Nursery achieves its high quality through a methodology that Brooks calls "realistic expectations." He creates production plans that specify how many units are required for each job on the nursery, from time to materials to the space needed for production. From there he puts together work schedules to accomplish everything that must be done.

"We look at everything from units of fertilizer to the time it takes to mow the lawn," Brooks said.

It is a methodology that Cox, as the new owner, appreciates. Just as Brooks did in the past, Cox will continue to focus on providing customers with great service and high-quality trees. And, as always, the way you get there is through hard work, attention to detail, and a passion for growing trees.

"With a business as small as this, there's not a lot of room for slop," he said. "You can do everything right, and Mother Nature can quickly change the game. That's why we try to apply discipline to everything we do."

As Cox looks to the future, he feels gratitude for what has brought him to this point. "I have been very fortunate to have had several great mentors who have helped me throughout my career, not to mention the support from my incredibly patient family," he said. ☺

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