

Specializing in the unique

THEY WOULD NEVER BE called a “garden center.” They would not be a place to go to for buying annuals in the spring. They have very few hard goods; it is unlikely that a customer would find garden chemicals, fertilizers, gloves and other items.

Their locations are usually not in a metro area and they rarely advertise in a mainstream media outlet. They do not even try to compete with the big box stores. So, what are they?

They are specialty nurseries that have a passion for plants.

These nurseries offer an unparalleled selection of plants, many not available in typical retail channels. Their owners are plant explorers constantly on the lookout for a new plant, or perhaps a variety that has fallen out of favor and needs reintroduction. As avid gardeners, they love to share new discoveries.

We are fortunate to have many respected specialty nurseries here in the Pacific Northwest. Here are three of them, each offering something unique to the world.

Joy Creek Nursery in Scappoose, Oregon, was founded in 1992, with a goal of growing unusual and hard-to-find plants that would thrive in the Pacific Northwest. In the beginning, it was a

mail order nursery with a print catalog. (The Internet existed, but it hadn't yet broken through to the mainstream.)

Not long after the nursery launched, customers started showing up in person. It was then the owners knew they needed to create a space to showcase the many plants that were unfamiliar to local gardeners.

Today, Joy Creek Nursery has a well-known, 4-acre display garden with meandering paths for customers to see plants growing as they might in their own garden.

Joy Creek Nursery is owned and operated by business partners Mike Smith and Maurice Horn. Mike is in charge of the garden design, installation, landscape and maintenance program while Maurice is responsible for retail sales, propagation, website content and the selection of new plants.

The display garden has proven to be a superb investment because it invites people to browse products throughout the gardening season. It also serves as a test garden for new plants that Joy Creek may be thinking of introducing. More than once, a plant has failed the test to be considered garden worthy.

Maurice considers Joy Creek Nursery to be a collection-driven nursery. They have collections of hydrangeas, hardy



Mike Darcy

Head “plant nerd,” longtime speaker, host of gardening shows on radio and TV, and author of the In the Garden email newsletter.

You can reach Mike, or subscribe to his newsletter, at itmikedarcy@comcast.net.

fuchsias, ornamental grasses and penstemons. Their largest collection is clematis; they have at least 200 different species and cultivars for sale at any one time.

Joy Creek Nursery often introduces new plants to the retail trade. In 2018, *Hydrangea* ‘Eve’, which was selected from 1,000 seedlings, will be introduced.

Today the business at Joy Creek Nursery is comprised of about 25 percent brick-and-mortar sales, 25 percent online sales and 50 percent in landscape design.

Even more removed from the city environment is **Dancing Oaks Nursery**, which is located in the countryside outside Monmouth, Oregon. Leonard Foltz and Fred Weisensee founded Dancing Oaks Nursery in 1997. Their goal was to create a destination nursery with an assortment of rare and unusual plants. Even though their location is somewhat remote, they felt that people would be enticed to come because of the unique selection.

Fred and Leonard also realized the importance of a display garden since many of the plants would not be familiar to the average gardener. In addition, they needed a way to show how these plants would grow in Oregon's outdoor growing environment. The display garden frequently includes suggested plant groupings where the plants complement each other and have similar growing needs.

Leonard told me that they are not disciplined enough to have defined “collections,” but rather they have an eclectic mix of plants. However, they do have some ➤



Hosta 'My Maria'
PHOTO COURTESY OF SEBRIGHT GARDENS

WHAT I'M HEARING

specialized areas in the display garden. These areas showcase specialty plants that are for sale, including plants from South Africa that are hardy in Western Oregon, Chilean plants, manzanitas, dryland plants, native plants, unusual maples and a new and expanding group of ginkgos including variegated types.

Dancing Oaks strives to have plants that are unusual and would not be readily available at other nurseries. In addition to their retail sales, they also participate in many plant sales throughout Oregon and Washington.

Five years ago, Dancing Oaks developed its first online presence, which is now responsible for about one-third of the nursery's sales.

In 2018, Dancing Oaks will introduce *Gentiana scabra* 'Royal Stripes'. The owners pride themselves on their knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff.

Sebright Gardens was officially founded in 2004 and is located northeast of Salem, not far from Interstate 5.

Owners Kirk Hansen and Thomas Johnson definitely specialize in certain groups of plants. They decided to focus on a select few genera of plants that they could grow in overwhelming quantities that would make them unique from any other competition.

They began with hostas; they now offer over 1,000 varieties of them! Since customers would often ask about adding ferns with their hostas, Sebright now offers more than 150 varieties of ferns. Their third largest collection is of epimediums.

At 4 acres and growing, Sebright's display gardens have made the specialty grower into a destination. Thomas started the display gardens in 2000.

According to Kirk, the display

gardens are meant to inspire customers with interesting plants and plant combinations. The owners hope those who are duly inspired will tell their fellow gardeners. The nursery has a knowledgeable and friendly staff to answer questions, which also helps customers have a positive experience.

Sebright still has a print catalog which they find very effective. It is free to customers at the nursery, at plant shows and for existing customers. Catalogs can be purchased from the nursery for \$2. Sebright does have a website and today about 15 percent of its sales are from the Internet. A new hosta introduction for 2018 will be *Hosta* 'My Maria'.

It appears that the specialty nursery business is alive, well and prospering. I found it very uplifting to talk to plant lovers who are passionate about their work, enthusiastic about life and optimistic about the future.

Happy New Year! ☺



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