

NURSERY COUNTRY

- ABOUT: Wholesale and retail grower of hydrangeas and companion plants.
- OWNERS: **Kristin and David VanHoose** (Pictured on page 15)
- EMPLOYEES: **4 year-round; 8 in peak season**
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- LISTINGS:
  - 50 NurseryGuide.com** 
- TRADE SHOWS: **Farwest Show**

Selections grown at Amethyst Hill Nursery include (top) Let's Dance® Moonlight hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Robert' USPP 20020) and (bottom) Pistachio hydrangea (*H. m.* 'Horwack').

PHOTOS BY CURT KIPP

# Amethyst Hill Nursery/ Hydrangeas Plus®

Founded: 1985 as Bell Family Nursery

**M**ANY NURSERY OWNERS GREW up in agriculture, but not Kristin and David VanHoose. They became nursery owners due to a mid-career switch.

"I just wanted out of corporate America," David said. "We did some research on top industries in Oregon. Agriculture was at the top of Oregon, and nurseries were at the top of agriculture."

And that led them to purchase a small, 8-acre nursery in Aurora, Oregon.

Today, the couple owns what is essentially two nurseries in one. Amethyst Hill Nursery is a wholesale grower of hydrangeas and companion plants. Hydrangeas Plus® sells the same plants to the general public.

Under Kristin's direction, the business has become a go-to source of hydrangeas for both plant nuts and their wholesale customers. They grow close to 240 different hydrangeas — a broad assortment, from the classics to new introductions, including some in the Proven Winners line. *H. arborescens*, *H. aspera*, *H. macrophylla*, *H. paniculata*, *H. quercifolia* and *H. serrata* are all available from them, along with climbers.

"We stick mostly to the old fashioned ones that have been around for decades and decades," she said. "People still love 'em."

But Kristin has certain favorites.

"I'm a real fan of the serratas with a little more dainty bloom," she said. "I like the range of color and size. And I like the lacecap hydrangeas a little better."

Along with hydrangeas, they grow companion plants such as azaleas, heavenly bamboo, holly, barberry and ornamental grasses.

The retail side of the business sells container plants and fertilizers via mail order and Internet to customers across the United States and Canada.

On several weekends in the spring and summer, there are open dates where the general public can come, view a display garden and purchase plants. The nursery also sells at several gardening events, and participates in the Cascade Nursery Trail, a promotional collective of seasonal spe-

cialty nurseries in the Willamette Valley.

The Hydrangeas Plus brand has acquired an enormous social media following, with more than 100,000 Facebook followers. Its full-color catalog is in its 15th edition.

The wholesale side of the business sells containerized material mostly into Oregon, Washington and Canada, but has customers in faraway places too. The business also sells unrooted cuttings to other wholesalers.

"We like the lifestyle and it helps us pay the bills and pay for the kids' college (two daughters, 13 and 16) someday soon," David said.

## Love at first site

In the 1990s, Kristin and David were both working office jobs. Kristin was a controller with Jubitz Truck Stop Services, while David was working in engineering and telecommunications.

After investigating business opportunities, they looked for a nursery to purchase. They learned that Art and Terri Bell, owners of Bell Family Nursery in Aurora, were retiring and looking to sell. They went to see the place on Valentine's Day 1999, which fell on a Sunday.

"We fell in love with the place," David said.

They decided to buy it. Art and Terri stayed on for three months to help them learn the ropes, and remained within reach after that. "They were always an email or phone call away," Kristin said.

Still, there was a learning curve. "I had all the office skills," Kristin said. "It was just the growing skills that we had to figure out."

"Our parents thought we'd lost our minds," David said. "In hindsight, we didn't know what we were doing, but we don't regret what we did."

David and Kristin changed the name to Amethyst Hill Nursery.

On the Bells' recommendation, the couple began attending every OAN gathering they could get to. "For us being a couple new to the industry, it was a tremendous resource," David said. "We felt welcome from the get go."

Kristin worked on the nursery full time, while David continued with Enron Corporation



until it infamously collapsed in 2001. David worked from home, and remembers hearing about it on the news first. The former blue chip stock was suddenly worth just pennies. Offices emptied out.

"I assumed I was laid off," he said. "I didn't know. I couldn't reach anybody. I had to call a buddy and ask." He worked on the nursery for the next five years.

As OAN leaders, both served as leaders in Clackamas Chapter and Kristin served on the Yard, Garden & Patio Show committee. Kristin then served on the OAN Executive Committee, including a year as president in 2010-11.

Meanwhile, the retail end of the business had to change with the times. When Kristin and David purchased it, mail order was done primarily by check. "Nobody had smart phones," Kristin said.

She got to work growing the database of customers. It was a matter of finding people anywhere who were interested in hydrangeas. "If you had the time and the energy, you could really pinpoint customers," Kristin said. She also added numerous varieties to the nursery's hydrangea menu.

"We've more than tripled the number of varieties we carried," Kristin said.

#### A passion for plants

David eventually found full time work again outside the business, but continues to help out where needed. "I call myself the maintenance man," he said. "Busted pipes, the power goes out. I also do the I.T."

Meanwhile, Kristin applies her passion for plants but also taps into her accounting skills. According to David, she keeps spreadsheets for everything: history, availability, inventory, production, orders and sales trends.

Speaking of which, these days the nursery sells more retail than wholesale. "It used to be 75 percent wholesale, 25 percent mail order, but it's flipped," Kristin said.

The nursery continues to fine-tune its operations, working to solve labor challenges, but keeping in mind there are some tasks that just can't be automated. "We want to be more efficient," Kristin said. "We do it every year." ©

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