

This page and opposite: KCK Farms LLC grows a diverse array of nursery products, including bare root and containerized trees and shrubs and cut peonies. Product selection is based on customer need and market opportunity. PHOTOS BY CURT KIPP

**NURSERY
COUNTRY**

- **ABOUT:**
Wholesale grower of bare root and containerized trees, conifers, shrubs, cut peonies and fruit understock, plus non-nursery agricultural crops.
- **OWNERS:**
Kevin and Keith Coleman (Pictured on page 15)
- **OTHER KEY PERSONNEL:**
Sales Manager **Ralph Guariglia**, Operations Manager **Randy Culley**
- **EMPLOYEES:**
75 full-time, increasing to 180 for peak season
- **CONTACT:**
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www.kckfarms.com
- **LISTINGS:**
4 **NurseryGuide.com** 🌿

KCK Farms LLC

Founded: 1983 by brothers Kevin, Craig and Keith Coleman

A DIVERSE PRODUCT LINE AND quick adaptability to change have been important to the long-term stability and financial success of KCK Farms LLC.

The nursery and farm was founded in 1983 by brothers Kevin, Craig and Keith Coleman and named using the initials of their first names. Currently, Kevin and Keith are the owners and managers of the company. They have grown it into a thriving business offering more than 500 varieties of nursery plants, raised on 400 acres of farmland in the heart of Oregon Wine Country.

“We offer a broad selection of quality plants to help fulfill our customers’ needs,” Kevin said.

Using both containers on gravel, and pot-in-pot production, the nursery grows shade trees, flowering trees, fruit trees, hazelnut trees, grafted liners and a selection of shrubs. KCK also offers field-grown plants, including bare root shade, flowering and ornamental trees as well as apple rootstock for commercial orchardists. Peonies are also grown in the field, harvested in May and June and sold as cut flowers.

On the farm side of the business, KCK grows hazelnuts as a commodity crop and various seed crops, and operates a grass seed cleaning business. It’s all part of a deliberate strategy of diversity that creates opportunities in different markets.

“There’s some comfort in knowing that if one segment of the business slows, another segment continues to grow,” Kevin said. “Hazelnuts are a protein source for developing countries. Our bare root fruit tree production supplies commercial orchards, which produce fruit for shipping all over the world. Sales of shade and flowering trees are determined by the landscape business and private and commercial construction market. Our cut peonies are a luxury item for people to bring a little pleasure in their life.”

KCK’s customer base, like its product line, is diverse. Bare root shade, flowering and ornamental trees are sold to other field and container growers across the United States and Canada. Finished container trees and shrubs are sold to re-wholesalers, retail nurseries and large retail merchandisers.

“We work very hard to grow the highest quality plants,” Keith said. “Plus we try to be fair with everyone, whether it’s customers or employees, everyone we come into contact with.”

Beginnings as a farm

Keith and Kevin have been involved with agriculture and the nursery industry all of their lives. Starting at the age of 7, they would go to their cousin’s farm to work in hazelnut orchards, hop yards and vegetable crops.

They have many family members in the nursery business: Ken and Marie Fessler of Fessler Nursery, Bob and Jean Fessler of Woodburn Nursery, Mike Coleman of Arrowhead Ornamentals, Mike and Debbie Farrell of Farrell-Eder Nursery and Kyle Fessler of St. Christopher Nursery all own and operate their own successful nurseries.

Growing up, Keith and Kevin saw that Oregon’s nursery industry was on the rise. The more they observed and learned from these family mentors, the more interested they became in starting their own business. “I had a desire to be self-employed, and didn’t want to be tied up in an office,” Kevin said.

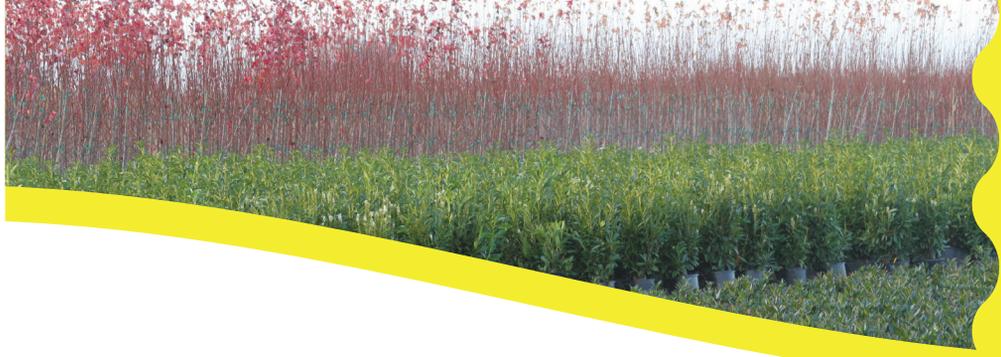
“I wanted to work with the land and have the satisfaction of growing crops that had real value and could feed the world,” Keith said.

Starting with a parcel of floodplain land on Grand Island in the Willamette River, they initially farmed 250 acres. Early on they saw an opportunity to combine the farming operation with nursery production. In 1988 they began growing cut flowers, flowering azaleas and hanging baskets. Keith and Kevin have never been afraid of change and are always eager to learn and try their hand at growing different crops.

“The only crop we still grow from our time starting out in this business is the cut flower peonies,” Kevin said.

A significant turning point for KCK Farms occurred in the winter of 1996 when heavy flooding inundated much of the Willamette Valley. The nursery was underwater for two weeks during the flooding. When the waters receded, the majority of the





containerized material had washed away, never to be seen again.

“We made a decision that if we were going to be in the nursery industry long term, we needed to be in a location that doesn’t flood,” Kevin said. “There were too many customers depending on us to take a chance.”

They purchased property on higher ground near McMinnville. This became KCK Farms headquarters, and the focus of their nursery operations. They retained the Grand Island site, and today they use it mostly for commodity crops and their cut flower production.

According to Kevin, customer needs have guided the evolution of KCK Farms and its product line. “We built the nursery from ground zero, so if we wanted business, we had to ask what the customer wanted,” he said.

KCK’s bare root production started 20 years ago and was based on a customer’s request. It is only one example of customer interaction influencing the nursery’s ongoing development. With guidance and help from very close friends Roy and Sarah Klehm, Keith and Kevin started growing bare root shade and flowering trees.

“It’s a big part of our business now,” Kevin said.

The nursery evolved again about 14 years ago, with the addition of a pot-in-pot production system.

“It helps us keep business moving,” Kevin said. “Pot-in-pot production helps to diversify our inventory, open up new markets and extend our sales season.”

As the business has grown, KCK has added farms near the Oregon communities of McMinnville, Dayton, Sheridan, and St. Paul. They sometimes rotate fields between nursery production and other crops.

“We give the ground rest,” Kevin said. “It’s possible to abuse the ground with some of the crops we grow bare root, so it’s good to plant a cover crop that will give the ground a few years to rest.”

The housing bubble burst in 2008 and the subsequent Great Recession changed the nursery industry in Oregon in many ways. “When 2008 hit, we

made several adjustments at the nursery,” Kevin said. “It was good to have the variety of other crops, and we started looking at automation.”

The recession was a turning point. “It reinforced the importance of being able to adapt to change,” Kevin said. “A couple of years on, we were stronger than before.”

Growth for the future

The company’s growth continues with important help from valued employees in every phase of the operation. “We lean on really good people,” Kevin said. “We have a lot of good talent.”

The farm currently has 75 full-time employees most of who are involved in the nursery part of the business. The head count increases in November and December, when the company is harvesting understock for fruit trees, and

again in May and June, when cut flower peonies are harvested.

“Customers and expenses dictate our labor needs,” Kevin said. “You find out what you’re good at and move forward with that.”

For KCK, the next evolution includes a second generation of Colemans working on the farm. Keith’s son, Blake a recent graduate of Oregon State University, already works on the nursery, and Kevin’s son, Spenser, is studying horticulture at Oregon State University with plans to work for KCK after he graduates in 2018. Both Keith and Kevin’s daughters help out as time allows.

“There are lots of opportunities in this industry,” Kevin said. “The kids have solid heads on their shoulders and they’ll definitely be involved one way or another.” ☺



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