

Brie Arthur (center) takes a photo before beginning her Walk the Show Floor With Experts tour at the Farwest Show.



Finding your way

Green industry professionals and the businesses they serve can thrive by cultivating strong relationships

BY CURT KIPP

AS THE ENGLISH POET John Donne wrote in 1624, “No man is an island, entire of itself.” The same could be said of a business.

A thriving nursery needs its key relationships. It requires customers, vendors, suppliers and advocates. Just as a prospective nursery owner or manager needs mentors and advisers who can offer helpful knowledge, a detached perspective or just a listening ear.

Josh Robinson, sales manager at Robinson Nursery, sees the value in those things, both personally and for his business.

“The relationships I’ve had through the nursery industry have brought me to a level I would never have reached on my own,” he said. “What I love about the nursery industry is everyone is so kind and generous and willing to help. What goes around comes around. People just genuinely care about each other.”

Doug Zielinski feels likewise. The owner of Alpha Nursery can remember what it was like 40 years ago, when he founded his nursery after growing up on a farm.

“I didn’t know nursery folks because I didn’t grow up in the nursery world with my parents,” he said. “We were farm guys. I made the transition into nurseries and it was the OAN that gave me that opportunity to meet people I wouldn’t have maybe met.”

For Doug, joining the association opened an ongoing dialogue and marked the beginning of many lifelong friendships. Doug even served as OAN president in 1999, because he saw the benefit. Now his son, Josh, is serving as a second-generation OAN president.

“We’re all competitors, but we share and we help,” Doug said. “You build pretty close friendships with people you may or may not hang out with. People are pretty open with sharing ideas and different theories on what they do. The book’s open, if you need help. It’s a two-way street, of course.”

Like old friends

Kristin VanHoose remembers attending her first OAN chapter meeting after she and her husband, David, purchased Bell Family Nursery in 1999 and renamed Amethyst Hill Nursery. “Joe Kupillas and Harley Higgins both came up and offered anything they possibly could to answer questions and help us get started,” she said.

Kristin and David both came from corporate finance backgrounds and didn’t know much about horticulture when they started. The help was more than appreciated. Kupillas even purchased some plants from Amethyst Hill that summer when his company had a need. It gave the new owners an early boost.

“We became good friends with Joe, and we played softball with a bunch of the Fairdale/Countryside Nursery guys,” Kristin said. The team lasted years.

Through the OAN, the VanHoses got to know **Dan and Diana Wells, Don Spence, Larry Fitzgerald, Terri Cummings, Eammon Hughes, Matt Sanders, Treda McCaw** and countless other association members who helped them.

Of course, nursery life has its challenges, and it often helps to have a listening ear handy — someone to commiserate. “It’s the camaraderie, spending time together, the good times and the bad,” Kristin said.

Today, Kristin is someone that other people ask for help and advice. She is sought after as a conference speaker. But getting to that note-worthy level required asking for help from others, such as Oregon Nurseries’ Hall of Fame member **Arda Berryhill** of Berryhill Nursery. ➤



Networking

(Left) Leslie Halleck of Halleck Horticultural, LLC discusses unique opportunities and challenges for women in today's businesses to a group of green industry professionals (right) at the Farwest Show's 'Women in Horticulture' networking event.



"Whenever I had a propagation question, I would just call Arda and she would just tell me off the top of her head," Kristin said. "There's always a trick with propagation, and you don't know until somebody tells you."

The growth of a professional

Patrick Newton remembers his unexpected introduction to nurseries: It came in the year 2000, shortly after he married the daughter of a nursery owner.

"That's when the discussion started about a younger guy who could come in and learn the business," he said.

Howard Powell had founded Powell's Nursery in 1992 and was looking for a successor. After asking questions, Newton agreed to work for his new father-in-law and learn the nursery business. He knew it wasn't a small thing to take on.

"Back then, I didn't know a lot about deciduous or evergreen trees," he said. "If you put me in a field of firs and spruces, I couldn't have told you what's what."

He learned fast because he had to. "I started at the bottom of the barrel," he said. "I took plant ID classes, night classes from Portland Community College and weed identification."

But it was the education from customers that proved equally valuable.

"We do propagation, and our customer base is right here in Oregon," Newton said. "I get to go to those nurseries and get cuttings off their trees. I get to see the trees they grow and ask them questions — what works for them, what rootstock works better for the climate they sell into."

However, Newton realized after seven or eight years that he didn't know too many people other than his customers. He started attending Sunset Chapter meetings, then ventured out to other chapters for holiday and other gatherings.

"I would go to other chapters just to get to know people,"

he said. "I had **Carson Lord** (of Tree Frog Nursery) introduce me so I could get to know more people. He was president then, so it was very beneficial to me."

At one chapter meeting, Newton connected with OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone, and the two clicked. Soon, Newton was tapped to join the Farwest Show Committee just as efforts were underway to remake the show.

"The reason I did it was somewhat selfish, but I also wanted to get involved," Newton said. "Business was lousy. I thought one way to get ideas and get to know more people was to get more involved in the OAN."

As a result of his deeper involvement, Newton developed more customer relationships and was introduced to others who could help him, including bankers. "It made it that much easier for me to sit down and get a line of credit for my business," he said.

It also gave him access to advice from more experienced growers. He picked their brains for nursery best practices, from whether to use recycled pots to why one would mulch with hazelnut shells on top.

"That sort of banter has been a wonderful thing," Newton said. "Without the Farwest Committee I wouldn't have met quite a few people I deal with on a day-to-day basis. That sort of thing has been very important."

Expanding a legacy

Kyle Fessler grew up in the nursery industry. His grandparents, **Bob and Jean Fessler**, founded Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas and his father, **Tom Fessler**, currently runs it.

"The OAN was a big part of my life growing up," he said. "The OAN Convention was our annual family vacation, and we made a lot of great friends that we remain in contact with today. Some of our OAN friends have become great fishing buddies, travel partners, and even the occa-



sional greenhouse-salesman-turned-groomsmen.”

Kyle expected to attend college and go to work at the family nursery, but to twist an old saying, life had other plants. He had the opportunity to start his own business, St. Christopher Nursery, in 2007. He immediately joined the association and currently serves on the Executive Committee as treasurer. His father served as OAN president in 1996 and he hopes to follow in those footsteps.

“I have built many strong relationships through the

association,” Kyle said. “It’s great to have friends that you can go to with questions about production, or see equipment being utilized in an operation.”

Relationships can also lead to business referrals. “There have been many instances where I’ve had customers referred to me by other members because I grew something they didn’t, and vice versa,” Kyle said. “The nursery industry in Oregon is so unique in that aspect, that we enjoy collaborating for each other’s benefit.” ☺

Reaching a new generation of growers

Josh Robinson

remembers when he was fresh out of college in 2010 and attending the Farwest Show. He didn’t know anybody and wanted to meet others in the industry his same age. He was sure others were in the same boat, so he did something about it.

He conferred with a sales representative at an East Coast nursery and acquired a list of names to invite to a gathering for young nursery professionals. His next call was to Jeff Stone at OAN. The association readily granted Robinson’s request to provide meeting space at the Farwest Show, along with appetizers and beverages.

The group was christened the Young Nursery Professionals, and budding entrepreneur **Crystal Cady** (now a sales representative for Skagit Horticulture) came on board to help. The gatherings became larger every year. The group eventually merged with another like-minded group, Emergent: A Group for Growing Professionals. The combined group still meets yearly at Farwest and at other shows.

“It evolved from a roundtable discussion with a few people to larger gatherings,” Robinson said. “I think naturally people want to have a beverage and go meet people. Now, I just have to go and enjoy it instead of worrying about logistics.”



Attending the Emergent group’s social at the Farwest Show are (top, from left) Jared Aubin, Jared Nurseries Ltd. and Miles Hunter, Hunters Garden Center; and (bottom, from left) Zac Tolbert, Local Plant Source Inc., and Alex Traven, Peace Tree Farms.

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