



The display garden at KG Farms Inc. showcases a colorful mix of their products. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

Excellence on display

Is it worth the trouble of creating a display or trial garden at your nursery?

We spoke to several growers about the challenges and benefits

BY TRACY ILENE MILLER

MANY WHOLESALE AND even retail nurseries establish a display garden on their premises. These gardens can impress, instruct and inspire customers, while showing them what the plants look like in a natural setting next to other plants.

Some nurseries establish trial gardens which can be similar in look or purpose; however, each nursery's approach to creating a display garden is as varied as the operation size, customer base and nursery stock.

We spoke with several growers to learn about the challenges and benefits of establishing and maintaining a trial or display garden.

New office, new tactic for display

At **KG Farms Inc.** (Woodburn, Oregon), a wholesale nursery that grows deciduous trees, broadleaf evergreen shrubs, and coniferous trees and shrubs in larger sizes, a brand-new office built three years ago offered the perfect opportunity to install

the display garden the nursery never had.

Starting with a blank canvas allowed the nursery to design a $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre garden that would present the nursery's plants in a much more specific and appealing way than in the field. It also provided an opportunity for customers to observe how individually ordered items, such as specimen grafted conifers, appeared in a landscape alongside grouped commodity items (such as boxwoods, for example).

"People like to see how they can utilize the trees in a landscape rather than just having it at a garden center," said Jay Sanders, KG Farms sales manager. "They like to see how it is displayed in a landscape design."

The nursery staff knew they wanted to create a landscaped area around the building, but by using their own plants, the area would serve double duty as a feature attraction and a sales tool. With the display garden right outside the office, Sanders and other sales people can start their visits with customers in the garden,

walking around looking at the various trees before touring the nursery.

"Most times, our sales are done in vehicles," Sanders said. "With 400 acres to tour, to get out of the truck in the fields is not always the best use of their time. It's better to view the nursery stock in a compact, nicely landscaped plot."

A seating area built into the garden allows for meetings — including with large groups of sales staff.

Sanders finds that customers enjoy strolling on their own if they arrive at the office while he's out in the field. By observing the plants in practical use, their customers understand their maintenance and upkeep, which is a constant question. "It does allow us to talk about the maintenance practice, and they get to see the result," he said.

If he had to make one adjustment, it would be to place the garden so more trees and shrubs could be installed.

"We've kind of backed ourselves into a corner where there is not a lot of open >>>

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space,” Sanders said. “I’m sure we will want to change out some of the plants as time goes on, but we’re pretty much locked into the design until we change out the plants in the coming years.”

A home and a display garden

At **J Farms** (Amity, Oregon) — a producer of grafted liners of conifers and Japanese maples, including newer, contemporary cultivars — the move toward a display garden was more happenstance.

“Move” is the operative word: When co-owners Jenni Burkhead and Jim Lewis began grading their homestead for drainage to build a greenhouse in 2008, excess soil was pushed into berms around the house. That soil drove the decision to showcase their cultivars in a now ½-acre garden.

“I never had an actual plan,” Burkhead said. “Design in the conifer world is pretty much a mixture of form, texture and color. So it’s easier to design when you have those elements to place together. As long as you’re familiar with a 10-year growth period, which is what I like to impart, that helps you to figure out placement.”

Given that planting guidelines for trees on the Internet can be global rather than regional, Burkhead said her intention in the garden was for customers to get a realistic sense of a 10-year growth rate based on Oregon conditions, which is a useful benchmark, especially for newer cultivars.

“The display garden gives us, as



growers, real visualization of what the tree really does,” Burkhead said. “It is as educational for us as it is for our customers.”

As a contract grafting operation, Burkhead said customers order consistently year to year, so although they may have visited the garden at least once, “I don’t have people dropping in.”

The garden has been a cost-effective way to promote their varieties. It holds mature plant material that can be photographed for instantaneous communication with clients and for longer-term use on tags, the website, in catalogs and more.

“The bonus is I get to look out every

morning into a nice view,” Burkhead said.

Burkhead said maintenance of the conifers in the garden is not a big drag on her time. “Conifers don’t really require that much maintenance, and my garden doesn’t even have irrigation,” she said. “We try to promote the ones that don’t take a lot of maintenance.”

As a small nursery without regular visitors, maintenance is not the top priority. A hazelnut shell mulch is used, for instance, but weeds show through at times, and they live with it.

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The display and trial garden at Iseli Nursery (below and opposite page) gives customers an up-close experience with the various conifers the nursery grows. PHOTO S BY CURT KIPP



Expanding over time

At **Iseli Nursery** (Boring, Oregon), their 2.5-acre garden is a display and trial garden only open by appointment. “We like to have everything we grow in there, as well as things that are in the pipeline,” said Sandy Dittmar, consumer marketing representative.

The nursery devotes a large amount of labor and resources into it, and Dittmar said it’s hard to measure sales or the value of the gardens — it just exists.

“For the customers who aren’t as experienced with the nursery’s materials, they see them in the garden,” Dittmar said, “And the experienced customers looking for something different, they find something they may have missed.”

The garden had a piecemeal beginning, starting with some landscaping on one side of the newly-built office building in 1983. Additions were made on each side until 2008 when the nursery was a stop on the tour for the Garden Writers Association annual conference, where all sides of the garden finally were connected.

The garden displays the product line and offers customers a place to see the size and shape of the plants in a landscape setting, as well as the special features that may not be apparent when viewing a small plant. It also provides a place for collectors and conifer aficionados — namely dwarf conifers — from all over the world to come. Plants aren’t sold from the garden, although the inventory in the garden is marked.

Laborers from elsewhere in the nursery have to be tapped to do upkeep on the display garden, which takes some negotiating, Dittmar said. The garden >>

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is the only significant expense because the plants are mature and the majority of hardscaping is in place. Regular upkeep is important for visitors and the landscape photographs used for tags and signage.

Reviewing the return on investment for maintaining the garden, Dittmar said it's hard to measure how many plants sell because of the garden. In some ways finding that value is a struggle for the nursery.

"We have to have faith that any customer who comes in, that it's a service for them to see what these plants can do," Dittmar said.

Mixing it up

Kraemer's Nursery (Mt. Angel, Oregon) is a newcomer to display gardens, introducing a combined display-and-trial garden this spring and summer. The endeavor comes after encouragement from customers and suppliers to do so, and recognizing there is a stronger economy to supports these kinds of projects

"It does have a fair amount of cost associated with it," said Barry Gregory, vice president of sales and marketing. "To make this work, we have to commit resources — someone almost full time — to maintain and care for it, and to get people out there to evaluate and assess the plants."

Otherwise, Gregory sees no downsides. Kraemer's Nursery's customers, mainly big box stores, encouraged the development of the trial garden to better assess new genetics. A benefit for suppliers to trialing plants in this region where not many nurseries are doing so gives them firsthand information on what grows well here — or doesn't — compared with other regions.

"With so many new genetics coming out, to find the best hydrangea you really need to plant three to four to decide which one is the best," Gregory said. "Certainly it's more cost-effective to do so on small-scale trial basis versus bringing in a few thousand and finding out those three to four don't rate."

Out of its 650 acres of production space, the nursery has approximately 400 acres of outdoor containers growing devoted to ornamentals, woody plants and some



roses. The display garden is a little over an acre, and only 20 percent of the space will be planted this year, starting with liners and cuttings. The design will include new varieties grown beside those in the current product mix so they can be compared to see which are truly better for the space. Plants in the ground will be watered and fertilized, but no pesticide will be applied to determine disease resistance.

"We'll have trial plants in the ground like in a garden, then right next to them the same plant in containers to see how they perform," Gregory said. "Even if it is a great plant, if we can't make it look good in a container, it's hard to say we'll go for it."

New plants will be added for trialing each year, with a three-year trial period to assess whether new varieties should replace current stock. At the end of the third year, if something doesn't make the cut, it will be pulled.

"Our goal is not to add more varieties; it is to prove ours are the best," Gregory said. "And I would expect a lot of customers will want to come and look at it, to see what plants are looking best. I almost see it on an annual basis. We have some good sales people, but our best sales vehicle is the nursery. Any time you can get people out there, it is a good thing."

A customer can only dream

At 4 acres, the display garden at **Sebright Gardens** (Salem, Oregon) is a notably large garden for a nursery. It started out as a personal garden for co-owner

Thomas Johnson.

"I'm a collector and gardener myself, and it just evolved into a display garden for the nursery," Johnson said.

Johnson moved his business from Oklahoma City in 1998. He has two businesses: one that specializes in irises, and Sebright Gardens that specializes in hostas. He started the garden in 2000, but it was not originally opened to the public.

"For anyone starting a nursery, I think it's a good thing to do a display garden," Johnson said, "but it is a tremendous amount of work. I wouldn't do it on this scale if it wasn't a labor of love."

The initial 2½-acre garden was located around the house, and it just kept getting bigger, Johnson said. "Just this last year, I've put in the last bed." He started on the perimeter, slowly filling in and eliminating all the grass as the years passed. Johnson does most of the maintenance himself, as the garden is his passion.

"It's hard for me to put a value on what goes into it, monetarily — I couldn't even tell," Johnson said. "We have a huge amount of plant material that we don't sell. We could propagate if we wanted, but we don't. The nursery is well-known, especially for its shade plants and the biggest selection of hostas in this half of the state."

The garden has become a destination location, with their customers providing the best in word-of-mouth advertising.

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The display garden at KG Farms Inc. includes plants the nursery grows, together with other plants, to show how the material might look in a finished landscape. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP



Visitors can easily wander the garden for three or four hours, Johnson said. Many can be found resting at the gazebo in the garden that is open seven days a week from April to November.

“We have some customers who come by every two weeks just to see what’s flowering in the garden,” Johnson said. “People ask if they can be married here.”

But Johnson said the nursery isn’t zoned for hosting events, and he’s not considering going in that business direction — mostly because the garden surrounds his home.

The location is one thing he would recommend or change about it if he had to do the garden all over again. When asked why he would move the garden away from his house, he responds, “So people don’t have their face plastered up against the window, which has hap-

pened,” he said, laughing.

“As a specialty nursery in this day and age, you have to do something different to get people to come see you; otherwise, you are just another nursery,” Johnson said.

“If you can get people to come to your garden and it’s planted in a way that they like, their subconscious goes, ‘If I plant that, my garden will look like that,’” Johnson said. Then, it’s only a few feet to go for customers to buy the plants they just admired.

The sale area and the garden area are separate on his property. Free catalogs are provided in the garden so customers can mark them up as a shopping list, and then head over to the greenhouse where the hostas are arranged in alphabetical order for sale.

Johnson expects the garden to require

more and more time to maintain, which is why he’s considering volunteer laborers. He’s heard of other nurseries doing so, and someone at the Hardy Plant Society gave the suggestion.

“I was hesitant, but they said it worked out well,” Johnson said. “It’s a possibility in the future.” ☺



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