



Working wonders

Despite pervasive labor struggles, nurseries find ways to find workers

BY JON BELL

THERE WAS A TIME, up until 2006 or 2007, when **Robinson Nursery** in McMinnville, Oregon would lay off at least 30 percent of its workforce every year, just after the fall season and heading into winter. Back then, the nursery industry's labor pool included a significant amount of migrant workers, and the business itself was much more seasonal than it is today.

Then, of course, the recession hit.

When the economy and the industry finally rebounded after that, the labor scene had changed. Many workers left the business when the work scaled back. Nurseries — those who survived the downturn — had grown lean and more efficient. They revamped their strategies and tailored their inventories; some turned to mechanization. But they still needed workers, especially as demand ramped up again.

That pinch — exacerbated by the lack of federal immigration reform — has persisted, and it's hampered the industry as a whole.

"Finding labor seems to be what's inhibiting growth," said Chris Robinson, general manager of Robinson Nursery.

The labor struggle continues for nurseries in Oregon and elsewhere, but people are figuring it out. From shifting to more full-time, year-round employees — Robinson Nursery now has 100 full-timers and just 14 seasonal workers — and finding new places and new people to recruit, to tapping a little deeper into

the H-2A guest worker program and keeping the pressure on lawmakers to enact reform, the nursery industry is adapting and coming up with ways to meet its labor needs.

"We'd all like to get more," Robinson said, "and I think we need to work together to find a long-term solution, because what we're doing right now is just a Band-Aid."

Short supply

According to the Oregon Employment Department, employment in nursery and floriculture production in the state had a seasonal peak at just over 14,000 workers in November 2007. The next year, it shed about 1,400 workers and steadily dropped over the ensuing years to around an average of 10,500 workers every November before a sizable seasonal drop-off.

The lowest point came in January 2012, when the number hit 7,300.

Though a shortage of workers has long plagued the nursery industry, the economic downturn greatly exacerbated the problem, pushing nurseries to play the catchup game when the economy and demand came back to life.

Other factors have contributed to the shortage, as well, including the aging of the agricultural workforce, an exodus of workers during the recession and the continued stalemate at the federal level to enact meaningful immigration reform. >>

Labor

Benjamin Miranda of JLPN gathers seeds.



Previous page: Joe McNally (left) & Zac Burke-Wolfe (right) of Peoria Gardens prepare an order of mums. Opposite page: Oliver Gracia of JLPN smiles in the field.

“When we talk about what keeps our folks up at night, the availability of labor is huge,” said Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries. “And a big part of what we’re seeing is the downside of 30 years of inaction by our Congress. It’s been a deteriorating process for well over three decades.”

The most recent failure on lawmakers’ part came earlier this year with the sinking of legislation introduced by U.S. Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Virginia), which, among other provisions, would have created a new visa program for foreign workers and required mandatory E-Verify usage to determine a worker’s legal eligibility to work in the U.S. Certain provisions of the bill met stiff opposition from different sides.

“No immigration bill is going to be perfect,” Stone said. “There’s always something that is going to irritate someone. It’s either going to be too restrictive or too permissive.”

Tom Fessler, co-owner of **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas** of Woodburn, Oregon, said legislation that creates a smooth process for foreign workers to come and work in the U.S. would go a long way to easing the industry’s struggles with labor.

“I’ve said it forever: We need a work authorization program for people who want to come in and work but who don’t want to become citizens,” he said, noting that Woodburn Nursery has refrained from using existing guest worker programs.

The federal H2-A Visa program already does create at least one pathway for foreign workers to come into the U.S., work and then head back home — legally. But it hasn’t caught on in Oregon or on the West Coast as much as it has elsewhere.

“It works better in the South and in some parts of the Midwest because there’s a smaller window for the activity there, and they are temporary workers,” Stone said. “Reliance on H2-A in the West doesn’t work and it’s not smart.”

Dan Fazio is executive director of **WAFLA**, a farm labor association in Lacey, Washington, that helps farmers find workers through the H2-A program. He said WAFLA currently has more than 18,000 H2-A visas

in Washington, but just 1,000 in Oregon; most of those in Oregon are for farms, with just a handful of nurseries. Part of the discrepancy, he said, comes from the lack of state support for the program.

“Oregon has — and this just baffles me — been hostile to the program,” Fazio said. “It baffles me because it’s well regulated and the workers love it.”

Another factor is that it’s easier for agriculture workers in Oregon along the I-5 corridor to string together year-round, full-time work — going from Christmas trees in the winter to nurseries in the spring, followed by berries and hops in the summer and back to nurseries in the fall — than it is for those who work out in eastern Washington, where the crop diversity is more limited.

Moving to year-round work

Offering full-time, year-round work is one way that a lot of Oregon nurseries are meeting their labor needs these days. It’s more appealing to members of today’s workforce, who aren’t necessarily looking to move from crop to crop with the season.

“More people want to put roots down and be a part of the community,” Stone said.

Robinson said that his nursery used to do all of its field planting in the spring. Now, as a way to offer year-round work, it does about a third of its planting in the fall. About half of Robinson Nursery is also a container farm, and these days half of that is in greenhouses, which also gives workers the opportunity to stay on throughout the winter months.

“I also think there are just not as many (migrants) coming and going from Mexico anymore,” Robinson said of the less migratory nature of the contemporary workforce. “It’s harder to do now.”

Ben Verhoeven, president and general manager of **Peoria Gardens** in Albany, Oregon, said his operation has about 25

year-round employees and about 30 to 40 in the peak spring season. They used to have a steady stream of folks dropping in to seek work, but these days, they have to be more proactive. That’s meant placing ads online and working closely with Linn Benton Community College and Oregon State University.

“I think it really helps that we are close to and have good relationships with the local community college and the university,” Verhoeven said, “because that opens up a lot of potential employees who are interested and hard-working. That’s been a really big part of our seasonal pool, but we know not all nurseries live within reach of resources like that.”

He said Peoria Gardens also dabbled with hiring high school students for a time, but their schedules weren’t as conducive to what the nursery needed. In addition, Verhoeven said Peoria prides itself on offering competitive pay as well as a handsome benefits package, both of which help attract and retain employees. Benefits that start to kick in after employees’ first year: four weeks of paid vacation, a week of paid sick leave, health and dental care, a pension and a 401(k).

“And frankly,” Verhoeven said, “we have a good group of people who are fun to work with. All those sorts of benefits, to a potential employee, speak volumes about the kind of company they are hoping to work for.”

At Woodburn Nursery, Fessler said they, too, offer competitive wages and benefits. And while that helps find good people, there’s no doubt it’s driven up costs.

What else could be done to help ease the nursery industry’s labor woes remains to be seen. Work will continue on the lobbying and legislative front for some kind of immigration reform that might help. The continued evolution of the industry into a year-round one, could also make it more convenient for workers to be employed year-round instead of on a seasonal basis. Mechanization and efficiency will likely help as well, making each independent effort a part of the bigger, long-term labor solution.

“It’s always a challenge, up there with weather, pests and disease,” Robinson said, “But we are all farmers, so we figure it out.” ©