



A corner of the market

The path of the specialty nursery has unique challenges and rewards

BY KYM POKORNY

THERE ARE MANY Oregon wholesale growers that offer something for everyone. For them, it's all about variety — growing and shipping as much of what their customers need as possible.

Specialty growers, by contrast, are a whole different breed. They pick one plant and offer more unique varieties, more colors and, generally, more knowledge about that plant than growers who don't specialize.

Oregon is home to many of these, and their pathways to success have been almost as varied as the plants they grow. For Kristin and David VanHoose, it all started with a visit to a nursery.

Kristin remembers that day well. She and her husband, David, visited the old Bell Family Nursery in Aurora, Oregon. It was Valentine's Day 1999.

The sky was blue, the sun shining, and the air mild. They'd seen a "For Sale" ad in the newspaper and Art and Terri Bell invited

them to visit the nursery with the idea the couple might buy it.

The VanHoses were sick and tired of the corporate life, where 60-hour work weeks were typical.

They had no experience in the nursery industry, but they had smarts and determination. They got home, looked at each other and said, "Gosh, did you even look at the house?"

Neither had, but they bought the place anyway. Now they're the biggest hydrangea nursery in the country.

Terri Bell had grown 60 varieties of hydrangeas, including a good chunk of older cultivars that no one else had. VanHoose now grows 320 different hydrangeas and their relatives, after renaming the business **Amethyst Hill Nursery/ Hydrangeas Plus®**.

"We jumped in not knowing what we were doing," Kristin VanHoose said. "Art

and Terri would come over three to four times a week and we'd go through things. They put together a map of what to do every month."

Different beginnings

The VanHoses were fortunate to have mentors. Many specialty nursery owners take on a business with a lot of enthusiasm and little experience.

"I would say, 'Go get yourself a good education' before deciding to go into the specialty nursery business," said Liz Schmidt, co-owner of **Schreiner's Iris Gardens** in Salem, Oregon. "It's tempting to start a small nursery, but you have to know the business. Go through the ag class for small farmers at Chemeketa (Community College)."

Janice Leinweber, owner of **Highland Heather** in Canby, Oregon, is happy she took the education route. She'd already gotten a liberal arts degree and was work- ➤



ing in banking when she decided to send her resume out and got a job at **Gutmann Nurseries** (North Plains, Oregon) in 1986. It was her first horticultural experience and it encouraged her to enroll in the ornamental horticulture program at Clackamas Community College.

Leinwebber had already been collecting heathers, but wanted to start a cut flower farm. She soon learned such a perishable crop wasn't for her and turned to heathers, instead.

"I was looking for a niche," she said. "I wanted to stay small. There was a lady going out of business in Hubbard, so there was an opening in the market to sell the coolest plant in the world. I've been doing this for more than 20 years and I still get up every morning excited to work with them."

Thomas Johnson, owner of **Mid-America Garden** (Salem, Oregon) and co-owner with Kirk Hansen of **Sebright Gardens** (Salem, Oregon), considered getting a degree in horticulture, but life took him in different directions.

Regardless of a formal education in horticulture, Johnson knew about gardening from an early age. He grew up on a farm and started growing plants from seed and selling them from the age of 8. He progressed to perennials and bulbs in high school. He knew he wanted to work in the industry, even though his father would say, "You can't eat flowers."

At the age of 27, he moved from Alberta, Canada, to Oklahoma to take a job with Mid-America Garden, a grower of bearded iris. Eventually, he became a partner and then bought the whole thing in 2012 and moved to Oregon.

"It was exciting," he said. "The thought of being able to follow your passion with plants, wow, I never thought that it could be a career."

Why iris? Why hosta?

"It really could have been any plant," Johnson laughed. "But I never thought it would be hostas. I didn't even like them. They were just green leaves."

But one year before he worked for Mid-America, he noticed their catalog was almost bare of iris because of a crop failure. Out of sympathy, he bought some hostas from them and decided they weren't so bad. When he moved, cars lined up for three city blocks and bought \$35,000 worth of hostas.

It's almost as if the plant picked him. And he's not alone. Fate brought VanHoosen to hydrangeas, a woman selling a nursery induced Leinwebber into opening a heather nursery and a hobby led to the biggest dahlia nursery in the United States.

Nicholas Gitts, one of the family members that owns **Swan Island Dahlias** in Canby, Oregon, talked about his youth on a dairy farm and his dad's interest in dahlias. Over time, the hobby grew to a couple thousand plants so he put a sign out and started to sell them. In 1963, he started the three-generation farm.

Getting the word out

Everyone strives for success in the specialty nursery business in different ways, but some tactics are universal. Advertising for one, especially the OAN's *Nursery Guide* and gardening magazines.

When **Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm** in Woodburn, Oregon started in the mid-60s, the new business turned to nursery and garden shows as a major way to get the word out. Their first attempt was not very successful.

"We put up flyers — black and white — with the types of tulips we had to sell," said Barb Iverson, co-owner of Wooden Shoe. "Obviously, using black and white to

sell tulips wasn't such a great idea."

Just as obviously, that early misstep didn't slow them down, especially after they added the annual Tulip Festival. To get the word out, they put an ad in the local newspaper.

"We had a traffic jam the first year," Iverson recalled. "We thought, 'Maybe there's something here people want to see.' That was 35 years ago."

When the economy started to suffer in the 2000s, the family looked at each other and brainstormed. By 2003, they made the difficult decision to start charging people to come to the festival. Somehow it paid off.

"Attendance went up," Iverson said. "It was like we created value because we were charging. It was the darnedest thing."

Success breeds success, and sometimes that can bring its own set of problems. The Wooden Shoe Tulip Festival has been so popular, the original traffic jam repeats itself each year. Now the company is working with a traffic engineer as well as county and state officials to get it figured out. It's not cheap, however.

The gate fees help with that, Iverson noted. They also compensate for leaving more tulips in the ground rather than selling the tubers. That leaves 40 acres full of the brilliantly colored tulips people line up to see.

Though traditional advertising reaps benefits, social media can be even better. VanHoose, who sticks to Facebook so as not to dilute the waters, could be the poster child for the effective use of social media. She posts beautiful photos, useful tips and, when she has time, videos. To get people engaged, she asks open-ended questions like, "What's your favorite mophead hydrangea?" It's working: She's got 107,000 followers.

Social media pays off for Swan Island Dahlias, too. "It's really big," Gitts said.

A bird rests on a tulip at Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm. PHOTO BY BARB IVERSON



“We can get 100 catalog requests a day from Facebook.”

The challenges of specializing

Having a niche, which almost guarantees less competition, is one of the advantages of a specialty nursery, according to all of the nursery owners interviewed.

“We are unique,” said Schmidt of Schreiner’s Iris Gardens, a 94-year-old family nursery. “People want to buy from us. And we’ve got our own hybrids that people can’t get from anyone else.”

Hybridizing is something dear to the heart of specialty nursery owners. They’ve got one plant they love and sell and making new ones is important not only to their market, but to their sense of well-being. When he retires, Gitts of Swan Island Dahlias indicated he will spend more time breeding. Johnson, who has made 300,000 iris crosses in 27 years, doesn’t ever plan to stop.

“If I had my druthers,” he said, “I’d be hybridizing everything. But with iris, I have a reputation — a following. It would be dumb of me to do anything else.”

There are challenges to the specialty world, too. Sticking with one genus can be a sound business model, but if disease hits or fashions change, disaster is waiting in the wings. So, Johnson and Hansen have added other shade-loving plants like epimediums and ferns to their inventory of 1,000 varieties of hostas. They’d like to add more as time goes on.

At Wooden Shoe, the family has a tradition of farming, having grown 100 crops since the family bought 12,000 acres in 1950. They hedge their bets by continuing to diversify, recently adding wine and industrial hemp to the mix.

“You can’t be reliant on one crop or one customer,” Iverson said. “How easy is that to go upside down. No one likes >>>

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For some people, it's too late. Even Iverson will admit there's nothing like a field of tulips.

Like all nurseries, specialty businesses suffer from lack of labor. Except for Johnson, the other owners said they may downsize in the future or already have because they can't fill their labor needs. Leinwebber, who has diversified with ornamental grasses, is one who won't cut back, but she also has no plans to grow either. With help from her husband and two employees six months of the year, she's at capacity and wants to stay there.

Owners find another challenge in trying to find equipment and other materials that fit their crop. No one else has the same needs, so it's necessary to have something custom made at a premium price.



"If you grow filberts, you can find someone else that has the machinery that will help you with your labor," Schmidt said. "It's already been built. We want to make things faster and more efficient, but we don't have a prototype. We have to design everything ourselves."

Volume is another thing that can be a challenge for specialty nurseries that sell less quantity at a higher price than larger operations. But once a plant gets attention and goes into mass production, no one wants to pay the original price.

"Who wants to pay \$30 when you can go to Home Depot and get the same plant for \$5," Johnson said.

Specialty nurseries have their challenges, but for these six owners, at least, the benefits outweigh any disadvantages.

"It's very rewarding to get the right plant in the hands of the right person," VanHoose said. "Like this guy at the coast who raises cows and is addicted to hydrangeas. He texts me photos. He's so proud of his hydrangeas. That's one of the upsides of owning a specialty nursery." ☺

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