



F&B Farms and Nursery

Founded: 1997 by Fred and Leigh Geschwill,
Bill and Heidi Geschwill



ABOUT:
Wholesale greenhouse grower serving the Pacific Northwest. Products include annuals, organic herb/vegetable starts, potted indoor flowers/forced bulbs, small fruits/berries/grapes, pumpkins, fall décor and poinsettias. They also operate a small, local, seasonal garden center.

PRINCIPALS:
Fred, Leigh, Bill and Heidi Geschwill

KEY EMPLOYEES:
Jon Venzke, general manager;
Regina Fischer, outside sales;
Alaina Gannon, inside sales

EMPLOYEES:
25-30 full time, plus seasonal

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22 NurseryGuide.com

Looking out for the customer is the pathway to success for **F & B Farms and Nursery**.

The wholesale greenhouse grower, based in Woodburn, Oregon, sells to independent garden centers in the Pacific Northwest. These are F & B's direct customers, but the nursery also pays attention to the end consumer's needs. By so doing, F & B can provide quality plants that generate repeat business for the independent garden centers they sell to.

It's all part of the nursery's philosophy that "success trickles up."

"It's important that we're growing things for the Northwest that will be successful," co-owner Leigh Geschwill said. "If the customer is successful, then the garden center is going to be successful, and then they're going to come back to us."

F & B's products include a wide variety of annuals, plus an assortment of different and unusual greenhouse-grown items that are also in demand in garden centers.

These items include organic herb and vegetable starts; potted indoor flowering and forced bulbs; pre-planted containers; small fruits, berries and grapes; pumpkins; fall décor items; and poinsettias for the holiday season. Their vegetable and herb starts are certified organic through the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

"It's important to prove to the customer you have good stewardship practices," Leigh said. "You have to be able to walk your talk that way."

The nursery delivers 52 weeks a year with its own fleet of trucks. "The seasons have condensed, so April, May are your big months, and then August, September for fall season, and then Christmas," Leigh said.

The deliveries venture as far north as Bellingham, Washington and as far south as Ashland and Klamath Falls, Oregon. They also deliver to central and eastern Oregon and Washington, with a few customers located across the state line in Idaho.

"We deal with our customers every week, so you've got to have a great relationship with your customers," Leigh said. "Our drivers are familiar with where they are going and how customers are reacting. They are like our front-line customer service people."

What they often see is that consumer needs and wants change frequently. For example, there are more men in the garden than there used to be, and there continues to be rising interest in ornamental edible plants. Changing climate patterns are also driving evolution in the plant palette that customers demand. Meanwhile, the breeding of annuals is rapidly changing what is available in the trade in any given year.

"Every year we've been in business, there's been change," Leigh said. "It's a good reminder to be nimble and responsive to the marketplace."

A family history of farming

F & B Farms & Nursery was named for its two founding brothers, Fred and Bill Geschwill. And although the nursery



Previous page: Left: *Coleus* in containers. PHOTO COURTESY OF F & B FARMS AND NURSERY. Right: F & B staff gather and order of pansies for shipment. PHOTO BY BILL GOLOSKI
From left, Alaina Gannon, Leigh Geschwill, and Regina Fischer pose in a greenhouse. PHOTO BY BILL GOLOSKI
Center: *Gerbera* daisies. Right: *Pennisetum*. PHOTO COURTESY OF F & B FARMS AND NURSERY



wasn't founded that long ago, in 1997, the Geschwill family's history of farming in the Willamette Valley reaches back much farther than that.

Fred and Bill's grandfather, also named Fred Geschwill, arrived as a German immigrant in 1931. Hailing from the city of Brühl, on the Rhine River, he eventually made his way to Oregon's Willamette Valley by the late 1930s. Settling on land south of Woodburn that is still in the family, he began raising a crop that the family to this day continues to grow.

"He drank more wine than beer, but he raised hops," Leigh said.

The elder Fred soon started growing vegetables and grass seed on his farm, which grew over time to 1,200 acres. He also raised his family, including sons Henry and William.

The younger Fred and his brother Bill, sons of William, grew up on the family farm. They both attended Oregon State University, where Fred studied agriculture,

and Bill studied crop and soil science. There they met their future spouses, Leigh and Heidi.

Leigh, who grew up in Portland, graduated with a degree in housing design from OSU. She met Fred at a country/western dance class in college, which a friend

convinced her to attend.

"I never thought that I'd marry a farmer, but there you go," she said.

Bill met Heidi when they were both studying crop and soil science.

After graduation, the couples moved home to the Geschwill family farm. Fred, Bill and Heidi put their education to work on the farm, while Leigh took a job in the lumber industry. She sold lumber, mill-work and windows in the Portland area.

Starting a nursery

Although Leigh was raised in the city, she had grown up around gardening and farming. She had horses, her grandparents had a farm, and she learned gardening from her grandfather.

"I was a farm-ready city girl," she said.

The four owners began to talk about what they could do on the property that could add value to the existing farming operation, and help generate their own revenue stream.

The two couples started a small retail

nursery. Taking advantage of a seldom used corner of the farm, located along busy Highway 99E, they put up their first greenhouse and hoped to draw on the traffic passing by. Their first crops consisted of seed annuals, cut flowers and hothouse tomatoes.

"When we first started, it was the four of us and we all had to learn," Leigh said. "It was seasonal and we planted everything by hand."

Growers at several other nurseries helped them when they were starting out. "It's a pretty friendly, pretty open industry," she said. "It's a 'rising tide lifts all boats' sort of feel."

After three years, Fred suggested that they grow wholesale plants as well. Everything was still done by hand, with no automation. Yard wagons were used to move things around the property. Deliveries were made in a family pickup truck with a canopy. When more capacity was needed, they purchased a trailer.

A few years after the wholesale operation started up, Leigh quit her job in the lumber industry and focused on the nursery full time.

"Every year since, the wholesale has grown exponentially," she said. "We still do retail, but we don't do a lot of marketing, so that we don't compete against our retail customers."

The retail operation is now called Happy Bee Garden Center and is managed by Heidi. It is open seasonally and sells >>

F & B produces edible plants for retail sale. PHOTOS BY BILL GOLOSKI



at market prices. They still service the original customers who helped them get started.

Leigh takes a leading sales role in the wholesale operation, making use of her design and problem-solving knowledge to operate and market the business, while Fred and Bill focus on farming and growing. Heidi helps Bill with the hops and combining during down time at the garden center. All four make major decisions collaboratively.

Early on, the nursery had ½ acre of greenhouses by the highway. Three more acres were soon added. They now have six acres of greenhouse space and two acres of outdoor space.

A big turning point was hiring the nursery's first head grower in 2006. Jon Venzke was an early head grower for the company and now serves as general manager. The nursery later hired its first salesperson and made a series of capital improvements, including a labor-saving flat filler on their planting line.

Ready for the future

Leigh has never regretted the decision to live on the farm and start a nursery.

"Once you're in it, the farming lifestyle has a lot to recommend it," she said. "You're close to family. My daughter has been able to grow up in relative freedom. We're busy, but if you need to raise a fam-

ily, you have flexibility."

She has used that flexibility to give back to the industry by serving on the OAN Board of Directors, including a year as president in 2016.

"The nursery industry is actually a really small industry in terms of how it feels. It feels like everyone knows everyone," she said. "What impresses me is people's willingness to help each other out. You don't see that in the lumber business."

After her presidency ended, Leigh continued her OAN involvement by serving two years as chair of the Government Relations Committee, which involved analyzing the impact of proposed and potential legislation, shaping the association's political messages and speaking to elected leaders on behalf of the industry.

Although no longer chair, she continues to participate in the committee. She believes in the importance of its work, given an industry that lost several operations during the economic downturn, and due to the aging of operators, is undergoing generational change. That has provided opportunities as well as challenges.

"I don't know that the market has grown exponentially, but there is more market share to divvy up between those who remain," she said.

She sees an assortment of perplexing

issues threatening to make it harder for growers to operate successfully.

Labor is one. "You used to be able to hire a whole crew any time of year," she said. But now, the lack of workers has kept the nursery from expanding as quickly as it otherwise could have.

Related to that is increased planning. "People must plan for their needs further out," she said. "I am seeing less speculative material on the market all through the supply chain."

For F & B, traffic congestion is another issue that hurts. A four-hour drive to Seattle, where many customers are located, now takes five or six hours. That's money lost.

And then there's the cumulative effect of regulations affecting employers and businesses, including wage laws, paid leave laws, taxation and more.

"When we started, there were lots of startup nurseries, but today you see very few," Leigh said. "I wouldn't want to start up now. It would be too difficult."

On a positive note, her ability to serve an expanding geographic marketplace with quality material keeps her content to stay the course.

"We are in this together, united as great Pacific Northwesterners have always been," Leigh said. ☺