



Serendipity Nursery

Founded: 1986 by David Sather

Serendipity Nursery

- **ABOUT:** Wholesale grower offering containerized and B&B broadleaf evergreens, conifers, grasses, and ground covers, which are shipped to wholesalers, garden centers and landscapers across the United States.
- **PRINCIPAL:** **David Sather**
- **KEY EMPLOYEES:** **David Sather**, president; **Mikaela Eaton**, sales manager
- **EMPLOYEES:** 5 year-round plus seasonal employees
- **CONTACT:**
 - 📍 8400 S. Sconce Road
Canby, OR 97013
 - 📞 503-651-2122
 - 📠 Fax 503-651-3398
 - ✉️ mikaela@serendipitynursery.com
- **ONLINE:** www.serendipitynursery.com
- **TRADE SHOWS:** **MANTS, Idaho Horticulture Expo, Farwest Show**
- **LISTINGS:** **145 NurseryGuide.com** 

THINGS THAT HAPPENED by chance — but happily so — have steered the destiny of nursery founder and owner David Sather. Hence the name of his nursery — **Serendipity Nursery**.

“It’s been a fun trip,” he said.

The 40-acre wholesale operation in Canby, Oregon offers an evenly-chosen variety of broadleaf evergreens, conifers and groundcovers across a variety of standby genera — maples, firs, barberries, boxwoods, cedars, dogwoods, beeches, cotoneasters, junipers, heavenly bamboos, spruces, pines, laurels, sumacs, arborvitae, viburnums, ornamental grasses and others.

“We start from our own cuttings and develop them into a finished product in containers or in the field,” David said. “We used to do our own grafting, but due to lack of labor, we now purchase our own grafts from other growers.”

Serendipity’s plants, trees and shrubs are shipped all across the United States to re-wholesalers, as well as landscapers and retail garden centers that have a landscaping division.

Doing right by customers is David’s guiding principle, and that of his sales manager, Mikaela Eaton. She is the one interacting directly with customers most of the time these days. “You’ve got to develop a relationship with your customers and serve them in a way that they can be successful,” she said.

The team at Serendipity is comprised of David, Mikaela, five other full-time workers, and some seasonal help. Most of the

employees have 15–20 years of experience, remaining loyal because David makes treating them well a priority.

“I’ve been in this industry 20 years and never met anyone who treated their workers like here,” Mikaela said.

From country to city

The serendipity of David’s life began on a dairy farm in Washington’s Puget Sound region. He grew up on his parents’ farm outside the still-not-large rural community Enumclaw. It’s located roughly halfway by car ride between Seattle and towering Mount Rainier.

Growing up near Seattle and Tacoma, David decided early in life that the city was where he wanted to be. “I couldn’t wait to get off the farm,” he said.

After high school, he enrolled at the University of Washington. He studied economics, minoring in business and finance. He worked at a brokerage house as he studied.

After graduation, David went right to work in the banking industry.

In the process of looking for ways to apply his knowledge of productivity and efficiencies, he developed a cost-accounting system for the bank, initiating marketing and economic research, while working under the direction of the bank’s chief financial officer.

But after six years, David left the bank. It was a matter of principle.

“I had a very good job,” he said. “I left because I had an active role in civil liberties and civil rights, and the bank had a policy of not lending to minorities, including 

Previous page: Serendipity Nursery offers a variety of evergreen products (left) and colorful shrubs and grasses in containers (right).

Left: The fields of Serendipity Nursery showcase a diverse range of products for landscapes. Right: Mikaela Eaton (left) was recruited to work for the nursery by founder David Sather (right). PHOTOS BY BILL GOLOSKI



women.” David disagreed with this institutionalized discrimination.

David accepted a position as a housing consultant at a nonprofit organization that provided housing to underserved communities. He worked there for two years, but then the program was shut down after President Nixon cut off federal funding.

His next stop was Seafirst Bank in Seattle. David was hired to develop a program to stop foreclosures and keep families in their homes, and to help the institution give minorities equal opportunity in the employment process.

This was a two-year project. After it ended, David thought hard about what to do next.

“I made a list of things I liked,” he said. “Up to then, plant material was a hobby. That’s when I started to look at it as a business.”

Entry into the green industry

David started a landscape maintenance operation called Parkwood Services, before long adding landscape installation services as well. The company soon became a landscape contractor for major corporations in the Seattle area, with Boeing and Weyerhaeuser as its largest clients.

The company grew quickly, peaking with five licensed landscape architects on staff and 110 employees overall. Both of his sons, Jeff and Jim, worked for him. David soon decided it made a whole lot of sense to add a nursery to the operation. That way, he could grow some of the material he was installing.

“I decided it was time to follow my dream, which was to own a nursery,” he said.

It was then David looked at sites and concluded Oregon would be the best place to grow. “The advantages I found in Oregon were far beyond what I expected,” he said.

What he didn’t find, initially, was the right piece of land for his new nursery.

But then, while searching for plant material for a landscaping job at the 1986 Farwest Show, he began chatting with Paul Werner, a World War II veteran who owned Werner’s Nursery. He asked Werner how long he had owned the nursery, and Werner replied that it had been 17 years.

“My wife and I are going to sell the nursery after the trade show,” Werner then told David. “We’re putting it on the market.”

David went to see the nursery. It was spotless and just what he was looking for.

“We bought the nursery 30 days later,” David said. “Paul would come back and visit, and he was always welcome here.”

David renamed the 40-acre operation “Serendipity Nursery” due to how the transaction came together. He purchased additional parcels in 1988 and 1989 so he could expand the operation.

He continued with his landscaping business in the Seattle area for a time, but



eventually sold it and moved to Oregon in 1992 to focus on Serendipity. The nursery initially focused on the Seattle area, where his landscaping business had been based, but now the focus expanded.

“I pursued the national market,” he said.

Over the years, Serendipity continued to expand, reaching 200 acres when the nursery was at its largest. David enjoyed getting out, meeting customers and selling his Oregon-grown product. “What a great experience!” he said. “As you go around the country, you get to learn about various parts of the country.”

However, David’s thirst for expansion was tempered by a broader concern about the fundamental health of the economy. As a student of economics, he watched warily as banks raised the valuation of crops to artificially make loans look better on paper.

David cut back his production numbers around 2006, and paid off loans to make sure he had no bank debt by the time the recession hit. And then, just as he predicted, the economy went south. The year was 2008. Economic indicators took a nosedive, financial institutions failed, employment sank, the stock market tanked, and the Great Recession was in full effect.

“I did not know where the downturn

was going to happen,” he said. “It happened a little earlier than I thought and went on longer than I thought.”

David believes the nursery survived because he anticipated the recession and was fully prepared for it. “My background was economics,” he said. “I knew what was going to happen.”

Positioned for the future

With the economic recovery over the last decade, Serendipity Nursery has regained its footing and adapted well to a changing marketplace.

“The plants people are planting are different,” David said. “Yards are smaller. We’re getting a lot more calls for columnar trees.” He has increased his quantity of ornamental grasses and altered his product mix to include more drought-tolerant selections.

It was another case of serendipity when David met Mikaela. Mikaela was a young nursery professional from Nebraska four years ago, and David was visiting a nursery where she did business. They struck up a conversation.

On the flight back to Portland, David recalled that he needed someone with Mikaela’s abilities. He reached out to her, and she ended up running Serendipity’s

trade show booth for two years.

When David began thinking about candidates to help him ease back his duties at Serendipity, he knew what his next call would be. Mikaela came out to the Farwest Show in 2018 to see the nursery. She ended up joining Serendipity the following July.

“I was leaving something very comfortable,” Mikaela said. “In Omaha, I had bought a house for \$101,000. I left my very comfortable situation to take a risk, but I’m the sort of person who knows you have to make yourself uncomfortable sometimes.”

Both sides have benefited. In Mikaela’s time on board, she has brought on new customers and helped the nursery exhibit successfully at Farwest and elsewhere. Her background as a horticulturist, landscape designer and nursery buyer has proven invaluable.

“I told my sons that I’ve probably hired the best person I’ve ever hired in Oregon,” David said. “I already see a major increase to what we’re doing in the local market.”

Through it all, David has remained proud to be an Oregon grower. He likes the way the nurseries work together to advance the industry.

“There’s just an attitude of sharing and comparing notes and doing things,” he said. “If you talk to somebody in the industry, they’re going to help you.” ©