

COVID-19 has resulted in the need to protect workers as they're being transported as well as in the field. When workers can't be spaced out, many growers have put up barriers to prevent the spread of pathogens, including J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

Growing in a new way

Nurseries modify processes on the fly to protect their workers from COVID-19

BY CURT KIPP

CCOVID-19 CREATED a game-changing societal threat — a deadly pathogen that can spread easily for up to 14 days without the carriers showing symptoms.

Nurseries and greenhouses responded quickly by implementing social distancing to prevent transmission. They looked at every facet of their operations, from propagation to field work to the loading dock, and made adjustments. Time clocks, lunch routines and bathroom breaks changed as well.

“The biggest thing we’ve had to change is our mindset,” said Tyler Kuenzi, general manager at **Kuenzi Turf & Nursery**, a specimen tree, liner and turf grower in Salem, Oregon. “We’ve gone from status quo, things looking consistent, to having to change.”

Doing that requires a team effort across the entire organization.

“I think our supervisors have done a really good job, and our employees, of taking it seriously and maintaining that distance,” said Chris Ames, director of operations at wholesale grower **Kraemer’s Nursery Inc.** in Mt. Angel, Oregon. “Every time we find something we need to address, we sit down and discuss it as a group, and we get the people involved in doing the job involved in discussing the ways to do it differently.”

That’s likewise true at **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.**, wholesale tree grower based in Boring, Oregon.

“We’re just trying to be really supportive and understanding,” recently-hired CEO Ben Rough said. “People are coming up with some great ideas from the internal part of the organization, trying to say ‘what about this’ or ‘what about that.’ We encourage people to come up with ideas and we can implement those safe practices.”

Robinson Nursery Inc., a liner grower in Dayton, Oregon, has taken its responsibility to workers seriously.

“We want to do everything we can to not get the virus in our company, so if we’re given suggestions, if we can easily accommodate them, we want to do them,” general manager Chris Robinson said. “It’s not just our team members. We’re responsible for them taking something home to their families, so we want to keep everyone safe. There’s a lot riding on this.”

Monitoring the workplace

Oregon’s “stay-at-home” executive order requires that each business choosing to operate must appoint a safety liaison to monitor compliance and watch for situations that need to be addressed. Ames referred to this as having a “policeman of the nursery” — someone to be visible and provide reminders.

“We’ve done as much educating as we possibly can,” she said. “We’ve done a lot more communicating with employees than ever before.”

But the communication runs two ways, and employees have raised questions or ideas of their own. “We’ve addressed employees’ concerns as quickly as we possibly can,” Ames said.

At **A&R Spada Farms**, a woody ornamentals grower in St. Paul, Oregon, the communication with workers is constant. “We even have six-foot sticks that we walk around with and remind our crews that this is how long six feet is,” sales manager Vinny Grasso said.

Robinson Nursery has two social distance officers. One is dedicated strictly to the H-2A guest workers, about half of whom live on site. The worker housing comes its own guidelines for the dwellings, but Robinson has been able to space everyone out as required.

Along with worker education comes personal protective equipment (PPE), which is provided by Kraemer’s and other growers.

“Masks are hard to come by, but we did buy our employees bandanas, and we have a number of employees making masks,” Ames said. “We have been handing those out if we see someone doesn’t have something. We’ve been trying to add PPE as much as we possibly can.”

Robinson provides its employees with a new mask every two weeks that they can take home and wash.

Adjusting the processes

Process adjustments at nurseries have covered everything that happens during the day, from clocking in, to breaks and lunches, to the various production tasks that take place on a nursery, and onward until the day is done.



Growing in a new way

Bailey Nurseries added partitions at its tagging tables for container shipping, as both a reminder and as a physical barrier. A roof was added to keep the rain off, as well.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY



At J. Frank Schmidt, the time clock procedures were entirely changed.

“Workers used to hand punch a card,” Rough said. “Now they swipe a card, and when they swipe in, they have to be six feet apart.”

Schmidt is also keeping worker groups isolated from each other.

“We have multiple farms and do not labor share between the farms,” Rough said. “We keep the same groups together all the time and don’t intermix groups of people.”

To further reduce the number of workers that are exposed to each other, **Bailey** and other growers are staggering shifts, breaks and lunches. “We’ve staggered all our schedules, so you don’t have people taking breaks and lunch at the same time,” said Shane Brockshus, Bailey’s manager of West Coast operations.

Kraemer’s has staggered shifts, put in

more handwashing areas and created portable lunch areas in the field. “We’ve also asked people to eat in their cars, and many are,” Ames said. “They must keep their lunches with them all the time when they’re moving through the nursery.”

On the job, efforts are undertaken to move workers further apart.

Some of these jobs, such as field work, have a natural degree of social distancing built in.

“Fields have been easy,” Robinson said. “Row spacing is 50 inches. If we have people working every other row, they’re 100 inches apart.”

Likewise at Kuenzi Turf & Nursery.

Only slight modification was required.

“Our rows are five feet apart, so when we’re having the crew put rods in [to stake trees], we know they’re going to be five feet apart,” Kuenzi said. “If we have them a foot ahead in the rows, then we know we’ve got that distance.”

For other jobs, processes were modified more extensively to ensure distancing.

At Robinson Nursery, major modifications were made to propagation procedures.

“Our typical spacing is usually three or four feet,” Robinson said. “In our propagation planting line, we added an extra conveyor and we spaced people out, so that everyone could maintain their >>



Oregon Valley GREENHOUSES INC.

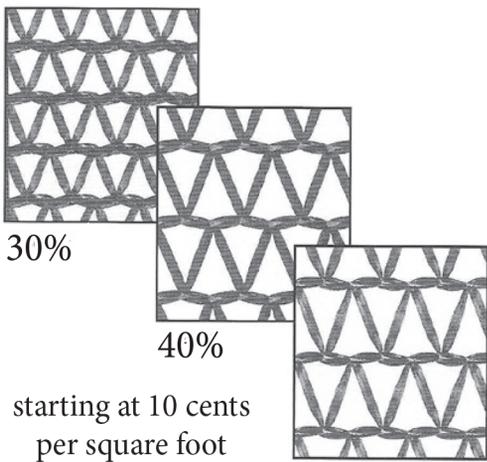
SHADE CLOTH SEASON IS HERE AND WE’VE GOT YOU COVERED

* WIDTHS FROM 12’ TO 56’ WIDE
* PERCENT BLOCKAGE FROM 30 TO 80%

JD EXHAUST FANS		SHUTTERS	
20”	\$275.00	24” LD	\$191.50
24”	\$350.00	30” LD	\$207.00
36”	\$1100.00	36” HD	\$619.00
42”	\$1256.00	42” HD	\$729.00
50”	\$1314.00	48” HD	\$799.00

Also Offering

Poly Film	Poly Carbonate
Wire Lock	Side Roll-ups
Ground Cover	Code Structures



30%
40%
50%

starting at 10 cents per square foot

prices good thru 6/30/20

BUILDERS OF HEAVY GREENHOUSES

20357 HWY 99E • AURORA, OR 97002 • 503-678-2700

www.ovg.com • info@ovg.com

six feet of separation.”

Robinson also added conveyors to its three-gallon potting line to space people out. As a Lean nursery, the grower typically avoids unnecessary transportation of product, but this is necessary. “It’s a little less efficient, but it allows us to keep the distance,” Robinson said.

Bailey, likewise, has pulled people off of planting or container lines in order to space them out, and has run the lines shorter if that is what is needed. In areas where there is more possibility of people interacting, the company has installed physical barriers.

Robinson has also installed barriers on any machinery that takes more than one person to operate. Examples include field machinery for trimming or planting.

Moving products, not pathogens

Arriving and departing freight trucks and their drivers represent another possible avenue of exposure. At Spada Farms, drivers used to walk into an office and get checked in. No more.

“The office is locked — we don’t have any external traffic coming inside,” Grasso said. “We built a window platform so they’re still six feet away from the window to check in drivers.”

At J. Frank Schmidt, arriving drivers must remain in their vehicles and call in by phone upon arrival. They’re then directed where they need to go.

Growers that operate their own delivery trucks must concern themselves with what happens off site. Kraemer’s outfitted drivers

with kits to keep themselves safe, containing PPE and disinfectant.

Back on the dock, employees must build loads and prepare them for shipping. Growers have modified procedures there, as well, to prevent transmission opportunities.

Kraemer’s is racking plant material before it is loaded, because there is not enough space in the backs of trucks to allow for proper social distancing.

Bailey installed partitions at its tagging tables, where containerized plants receive labels just prior to going on the truck. They provide a physical barrier and remind workers to stay distanced.

A victory every week

Dealing with COVID-19 has challenged nurseries like never before. They are forced to take greater precautions, modify their processes on the fly, trade off efficiency to make worker protection the priority, manage worker communication and morale, and do all this so they can sell into a struggling economy, with markets that are uncertain at best.

“I just keep saying that I really feel like every week’s a victory right now,” Brockshus said. “Every week that we get through and keep our employees healthy and our customers healthy, and we’re able to ship product out, every week is a victory.” ☺

Curt Kipp is the director of publications and communications at the Oregon Association of Nurseries, and the editor of Digger magazine.



95 Years and Still Growing Strong



Quality Shade and Flowering Trees Since 1925



For more information please visit our website at:
www.surfacenursery.com

33740 SE Lusted Road
Gresham, OR 97080

Phone: (503) 663-5224

(800) 831-2599

Fax: (503) 907-8099

Email:

Trees@surfacenursery.com

MARR BROS. BARK

FAST DELIVERY
Commercial & Residential

- HEMLOCK • FIR
- SAWDUST • HOG FUEL
- REGULAR OR FINE GRIND



WHOLESALE PRICES ON LARGE QUANTITIES
FREE ESTIMATES - COMPETITIVE PRICES

503-838-1830

875 S. PACIFIC HWY., MONMOUTH - MAILING: P.O. BOX 39, MONMOUTH, OR