

Growing with the industry

The Farwest Show has brought attention to the Oregon nursery industry over the years, along with more business

BY CURT KIPP

IT ALL BEGAN 47 years ago with high hopes and a little bit of hype. “All roads lead to Portland, September 11–13, for the Farwest Nursery, Garden and Supply Show: the biggest, boldest nursery show ever staged in Farwest Country,” trumpeted the August/September 1973 issue of *Digger*.

Accompanying the article was a photo of Jane Hoyt, Miss Farwest Show, fresh from working as a movie double for Raquel Welch, standing with a wave and a smile in the back of a Datsun pickup truck next to a cedar boxed specimen pine.

“Whether you are a retail buyer, wholesale nurseryman, landscape architect or contractor, gardener or florist, the Farwest Show has something to offer you,” the magazine stated. “A panorama of the newest and best nursery stock, equipment and supplies will be on view in a garden setting.”

The first show had a turnout that would be considered small by later standards — just 120 exhibitors and 1,500 attendees from 27 states and three countries (the United States, Canada and the Netherlands).

“There were some naysayers and doubters before the first show,” said Jim Heater, then executive secretary of the Oregon Association of Nurserymen (now Nurseries), an overseer of the first Farwest Show, and now a member of the Oregon Nurseries’ Hall of Fame.

But the idea was successful enough the first time to grow legs.

And grow it did. Now, almost five decades later, Farwest is a staple of the nursery industry trade show calendar.

“Once the first show had gone by, everyone was way more enthused,” Heater said.

Bringing attention to Oregon

The show began some 17 years before the twin-spired Oregon Convention Center became the big trade show venue in town.

The exhibition halls under Portland’s Memorial Coliseum — built in 1960 and now included on the National Register of Historic Places — was the best facility available. One had to descend staircases at the coliseum entrance to access the exhibition halls and meeting rooms hidden below, like they were entering a subway.

But despite these humble beginnings, the first Farwest brought new attention to Oregon’s nursery industry, including from buyers back East. Arda and Roger Berryhill, owners of Berryhill Nursery in Sherwood, were among those who benefitted.

“It was just an exciting adventure,” said Arda, now a member of the Oregon Nurseries’ Hall of Fame. “Nothing like it had ever been done. All of us were so excited to see customers from the Midwest and East that we’d never had contact with, most of us.”

For the Berryhills, that translated into more business. “It brought us some customers we’d never seen,” Arda



said. "I still have some customers to this day, including from Arkansas, that I never would have had contact with."

According to Heater, show attendees really liked what they saw in Oregon.

"The quality of the product that people saw here accounted a lot for the increases you saw each year in attendance," he said. "A lot of the people our bigger growers were shipping to had never been here."

The will to begin

Getting the show started required extensive preparation, starting with the organizational will to get started.

Dick Joyce, owner of Joyce Farms and now a member of the Oregon Nurseries' Hall of Fame, was on the OAN board when the decision was made to start the Farwest Show. According to Joyce, one of the key decisions was the hiring of Jim Heater as OAN executive secretary. A skilled organizer was necessary or it just wasn't going to work.

Heater had grown up in farming, graduated college and gone to work in the banking industry. He already had founded the Northwest Agricultural Show, which took place in the winter and showcased agricultural equipment. He was also directing the Agri-Business Council of Oregon, now known as AgLink, which fostered relationships between the different agricultural sectors.

"We asked him to take on OAN too, and we were getting on in the summertime late enough in the year that he was concerned about the convention," Joyce said. "He told the board he would take it, if I would take charge of convention."

Joyce agreed to do that, and Heater came on board. Soon the move was made to consider a national trade show promoting the Oregon nursery industry.

According to Joyce and Berryhill, a nursery grower named Duane Sherwood, described by Berryhill as a "forward thinker," promoted the idea relentlessly.

"Duane realized that (Oregon) is where things can be grown basically for anywhere, and he was a pretty good salesman," Joyce said.

Farwest wasn't his only big idea.

"He bought a computer and at the time, the computer filled half your basement," Joyce said. "He paid a lot of money for it and tried to get everybody to put their inventory on that computer. Most of us were pretty independent and didn't think that was the best idea. But he had some good ideas, and one of them was the Farwest Show."

Sherwood presented his proposal to the OAN Board of Directors.

"Duane had a darn good argument to the board," Joyce said. "Initially, we did not look on it as a money-raiser. It turned out to be, of course."

Major decisions

The decision was made to proceed with the idea. The first step was getting growers on board, as the new show was going to be by, of and for them.

"We called together a number of the larger growers to kind of shepherd this movement," Heater said. "They were kind of the board of directors or sounding board. It was a group of probably eight or 10. They were very supportive of the idea of a show and gave us much direction and as much help as they could, and away they went."

Ray Klupenger, the second-generation manager of Klupenger Nursery, was among those larger growers. He chaired the very first Farwest Show, and ended up serving in that role for a decade.

According to Klupenger, initial discussions centered around the idea of making it a West Coast nursery trade show, working arm in arm with nursery associations from

Washington and California.

"I approached both of those associations to see if either would want to go in on it and have three different Western locations, each changing each year, but neither wanted to get involved financially and take the risk," Klupenger said. "That's when we started to go by ourselves."

With Oregon the focus of the new show, the next decision to make was choosing a location. That ended up being the Exhibition Hall at Memorial Coliseum in Portland. "We'd been there with the Ag Show, so we knew that building," Heater said.

"One of the things we found helpful, the coliseum was designed with a number of meeting rooms around the arena, and we used those rooms for educational meetings," Heater said. "It was really great. A person could spend some time on the equipment side or the nursery side and get educated about the things they were interested in."

Finally, the timing. The industry's biggest buying shows at the time took place back East in January, so the choice was made to have Farwest in August or September prior. This allowed Oregon to get the jump on early order writing.

"We proposed to put our show before those shows," Klupenger said. "You could say it's after those shows, or you could say before, but we said it was before."

The dates chosen for the first Farwest Show were September 11-13, 1973, but organizers spent a year in advance promoting the new show to ensure its success.

"I went on the road to four



Clayton Hannon

In 1996, Jack Long was president of the American Association of Nurserymen (AAN), so they held the AAN Convention here in Portland in convention with Farwest. That was a real big year — a lot of interest, a lot of newcomers, and a lot of the industry leaders from around the country were here.

There was a big banquet and dinner on Saturday night, at the Farwest Show. The only problem for me was that our ice delivery for icing the plats (for watering purposes) did not arrive on schedule. Our exhibitors would normally go pick up the ice and do their own icing, but there was nothing there.

It didn't come until after 5 p.m. when the show was over, so I made the decision that the plant material in the show was more important than me going to a banquet.

There were some people within the AAN's organization that resented the fact that I made the decision to stay and spend 3-4 hours icing plant material instead of spending time at the banquet, but that all worked itself out. There were three of us that stayed around and did the icing routine.



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major shows around the nation — one in Chicago, the Concord in New York, the Southern show in Atlanta, and the Texas show,” Heater said. “We went for the whole country. That’s why I hit those four shows around the nation. Those were the only four shows of significance at that time. We had real good nationwide coverage.”

At these shows, Klupenger and Heater handed out show brochures, along with copies of the OAN Directory and Buyer’s Guide.

“We had the slogan of Oregon, the Nursery State, and that was our theme, and that helped pique interest as well,” Heater said.

Growth and change

Following the first Farwest Show, organizers turned their attention to the second show, in 1974, which was even more successful. It nearly doubled in size, with 200 exhibitors and 50,000 square feet of exhibit space.

Barbara Hupp of Drakes Crossing

Nursery in Silverton, Oregon first exhibited at the show in 1975. “The show was in the Memorial Coliseum and was full. We got on a waiting list and were offered a triangle shaped space, behind the folding doors that separated two sections,” she said. “The first booth was a gold felt fabric, suspended from a curtain rod with cut out letters and a felt tree. We still have it!”

Even with a bad space, exhibiting at Farwest helped put the nursery on the map.

“No one knew who we were, but the booth next door sold ladybugs and people would stop to see his display and then notice us,” Hupp said. “Each year we got a better booth and have never missed a year.”

The show continued to grow every year. Soon, there was interest in taking the show outside Oregon.

The 1977 Farwest Show was held in Seattle, Washington in conjunction with

Nancy Buley

I was hired by Oregon Association of Nurseries (OAN) to cover educational sessions back when I was a journalism major at Oregon State University. I was hired to attend the sessions and write up stories — reports of the educational sessions — and those were published in Digger, and I think the extension service was also involved.

I remember going to a talk on grafting and I have this distinct memory of Verl Holden giving a talk on grafting and sharing his expertise. That was something that stuck with me with the Farwest Show. Everyone was so generous with sharing their expertise and being welcoming to people who were new. I just remember people soaking up knowledge.



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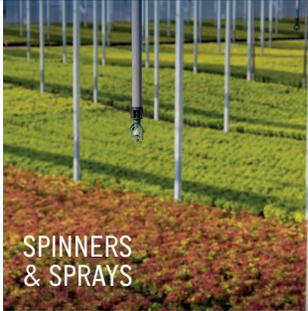
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the American Association of Nurserymen (AAN) convention. The show was set up at the Seattle Center Exhibition Hall. This facility predated the Washington State Convention Center, current home of the Northwest Flower & Garden Show, which didn't come along until 1988.

People thought that the combination of Oregon growers and the Seattle area's strong community of retailers would be highly successful, and it was. According to the follow-up story in *Digger*, the Farwest Show in Seattle had record attendance at the time — there were 5,000 people and 324 exhibitors, also the most up to then.

The connection with the AAN Convention and the availability of more exhibition space for booths than in Portland were likely factors. But it turned out to be the only Farwest Show held outside of Oregon. The prevailing sentiment was that

members wanted the show back in Portland.

"We went up for one year and we found out that it was a bad move," Klupenger said. "People wanted to come to Oregon. That's all there was to it."

Alternating the locations was considered, but the idea was abandoned. There was a recognition that touring nurseries was a key part of Farwest. Even the year it was held in Seattle, there were organized buses to see the Oregon nurseries.

"The key was to bring people out to Oregon," Klupenger said.

A major transformation

Clayton Hannon was hired as OAN Executive Director in 1988, following 18 years serving as the executive director of the Portland Rose Festival. He experienced his first Farwest in 1989 in the old Memorial Coliseum space.

After the twin-spired Oregon Convention Center opened on the other side of Interstate 5 in late 1990, Farwest moved there at the first opportunity — August 23–25, 1991.

"I had the privilege of having the first show at the Convention Center," Hannon said. "It was the difference between night and day, moving from the basement of the Coliseum to a brand-new facility. It was quite a treat."

The move set the stage for tremendous growth.

"It sounds corny, but (the show) came alive," Hannon said. "The first couple of years, we didn't use as much exhibit hall space as we did eventually, but it was a tremendous feeling to watch the show grow in the number of exhibitors and programs, such as the educational seminars and so forth."

Hannon credited the contributions >>



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of volunteers, extension agents and Farwest Show Committee members for capitalizing on the opportunity. “Of course, we were in the middle of a nice growth period as well, for the industry,” he said. “Everything played right into our hands. We couldn’t have asked for anything better.”

That first Farwest Show at the Oregon Convention Center brought 13,007 visitors out to see 550 exhibitors and 755 booths. It grew from there.

Hannon believes the growth of Farwest during the 1990s brought the Oregon nursery industry to greater prominence. Certainly, the numbers bear that out. The industry’s sales doubled during the decade, from \$299 million in 1990 to \$642 million in 2000.

“The Oregon industry grew, and that’s when we started challenging the beef and cattle industry for a prominent

spot in Oregon’s economic status as far as agriculture,” he said. “The association itself grew. That was also about the time that the effort to bring about the long-standing dream of an Oregon Garden was taking place.”

The 80-acre botanical display garden, located in the Cascade Range foothills in Silverton, Oregon, opened in 1999 with support from the OAN and several key Oregon nursery industry players. That was the year Hannon retired as executive director, following 11 years of service.

“One of the things that I always did during cleanup and moveout was to help sweep up the bark dust so they could pick it up,” Hannon said. “I don’t remember who it was, but someone got me a big push broom, and they put my name on the broom and gave it to me as a going away memento. It eventually,

after we moved a couple times, ended up in my son’s garage.

“Believe it or not, he still has that broom stashed in the corner, and whenever I see that broom, it reminds me of another Farwest story. After 21 years, you keep some memories of all the good things that happened.”

Hannon was inducted into the Oregon Nurseries Hall of Fame in 2002.

“I just think the whole atmosphere and outlook of the industry during that period was very positive, and showed signs of increased interest and involvement,” Hannon said.

In 2003, the Oregon Convention Center went from five exhibit halls to eight, constructing an expansion on top of the former surface parking at the south end of the complex, and adding a garage beneath. This allowed for 40% more booth space, accommodating 875 exhibitors in 1,365 booth spaces.



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Kathy LeCompte

My husband Dave and I started Brooks Tree Farm in 1980, so we're celebrating our 40th year in business this year. Our first year in the show was actually 1982. My mother and father had a booth with Drake's Crossing Nursery, where I'd grown up on the farm. We developed a really unprofessional sales list and handed it out from their booth.

In 1983, we bought our own booth. We built this really heavy lattice framework and hauled it a couple of times before investing in a professional, portable version.

I remember customers literally running to our booth when the doors to the show opened to get in line to order trees. We had phones back then, but the show was the big draw. Eventually people just called ahead of the show to order.

Many people say the show is just a networking opportunity now, but I have always known that the Farwest Show serves as a deadline. "Get your order in before Farwest" is a mantra. So, in that respect, even though the orders don't get written there as much as in the beginning, the Farwest Show still triggers that imaginary deadline.

Longtime members will know that back in the Memorial Coliseum days, the doors opened onto a particular aisle called "Holy Row." You had to have a ton of seniority to get to Holy Row. Drake's Crossing never made it and we certainly didn't.

Then we moved to the new Convention Center and the floor plan no longer had a specific best entry aisle. Holy Row died out. That was a shame. It was fun to know who was at the top of the pile!

In 1985, I gave birth to Kimberly, who now works in our office and is principally involved in developing the catalog. Five weeks later, we all went to the Farwest Show. When baby Kim needed fed, I'd have to go into a ladies' room. Leanne Van Essen also had a newborn and would join me. There were no chairs, so women would come open the doors to the stalls and order plants while we sat there nursing our babies. Kim has never missed a Farwest Show in her entire life.

I also love and appreciate the after parties so many vendors put on. Those are such a good place to connect and an opportunity to thank the manufacturers who support the industry.

About 10 years ago I had foot surgery and was healing when the Farwest Show rolled around. No way could I walk, so we rented a little cart and by the end of the day, the battery went dead. Other show members pushed me in the cart up the hill along Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. to the hotels where the parties were underway. I got to sit on a bed with my leg elevated and held court! Pretty cool friends in a pretty cool industry.

But even that could not keep pace with Farwest's growing needs for very long. The new spaces were filled immediately, and for years, there was a waitlist for exhibitors.

Serious setbacks

The Great Recession starting in 2008 took a bite out of the Oregon nursery industry due to the housing bubble. Growers were left long on material, and the state lost an estimated 30–40% of its growers.

The Farwest Show consequently lost exhibitors, and the rise of e-commerce didn't help with recovery from those losses.

And then this year, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted cancellation of the Farwest Show for the first time in its 47-year history. Traveler confidence was already shaky due to the need for social distancing, but in late May, an order from Oregon Gov. Kate Brown forbade large gatherings >>



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Doug Zielinski

When Alpha Nursery was a very small nursery in the 1980s, R.J. Tancredi (now at 40 years with Alpha Nursery) and I took the big step to exhibit at the Farwest Show at the Memorial Coliseum. Our 10-by-10 booth was furnished with wooden boxes – Humboldt Beer cases, actually – that once decorated my fraternity room at Oregon State University.

We placed plants in and around the boxes and used the sign provided by the convention. Along with our very small catalog, we passed out Brooks prunes, straight from my dad’s orchard, next to where we put up our first greenhouse. It was very simple.

My memories include meeting so many people in our industry and experiencing a feeling of unity. Plant people are unique, and they love to share ideas with each other. R.J. and I learned so much from that show and all of the others since then. The Farwest Show had, and maintains, a great reputation for buyers to come from everywhere to locate and purchase their plants.

It was at a show, in 1989, when a man approached us about representing our product in Ohio. That encounter with Maury was the beginning of putting Alpha Nursery on the map.

That one rep quickly became two, and now we have representation in several states. We wouldn’t be where we are today without them and the Farwest Show.

The show meant so much to me, so I got myself involved in the OAN and served on the FWS committee for many years. One of my favorite duties was when the show ended and having the “power” running the loading docks with other volunteers. It was crazy and never a dull moment getting everyone in and out in a semi-organized fashion. This is now much more organized, and I’ve given up my title.

I’ve met some special people at the shows over the years – establishing valued customer relationships, learning from the classes (and the hotel “happy hour”), and creating lasting friendships with those in our industry.

It is my hope that in 2021 we will be back to normal, because the Farwest Show can’t be replicated without being there in person.

through September. At this writing in mid-July, the Oregon Convention Center remains completely shut down, and no indoor events of more than 10 people are allowed.

But despite these setbacks, Heater still sees a need for Farwest once major events start happening again.

“Recently all of these shows have begun to take a hit because of online ordering, but I think the need is still there, especially the nurserymen, for this show,” he said. “The nursery industry has come a tremendously long ways in the last 25 years, or more than that, but it’s still a great bunch of people to work with.” ☺

Curt Kipp is director of publications and communications at the Oregon Association of Nurseries, and the editor of Digger magazine. He can be reached at ckipp@oan.org.

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