



Lone Elder Nursery owners Tom and Chris Utterback and nursery manager Angel Perez (with Suzy).

GROWER PROFILE

Lone Elder Nursery

PRODUCTION:

Field-grown 95-90%

Container-grown 5-10%

KNOWN FOR:

More than 200 varieties of B&B conifers, with an emphasis on pines and spruces.

PEOPLE

Tom and Chris Utterback, owners; Angel Perez, nursery manager.

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LONE ELDER NURSERY

LONE ELDER NURSERY is an enduring collaboration between three people with a passion for nurseries and farming.

Dr. Thomas Utterback is a retired orthopedic surgeon who grew up on a cotton farm in New Mexico, where he first learned to drive a tractor. His wife and co-owner, Chris Utterback, acquired a taste for farming by raising goats and llamas.

And their nursery manager, Angel Perez, more or less grew up on nurseries.

All three acquired their passion for farming in different ways, but running a nursery together is their dream come true.

The nursery isn't large — it consists of 44 acres of field growing space — but it offers more than 200 conifer varieties. Most are sold B&B, with about 5-10% sold in containers. Some of the B&B conifers, though not most, are grown to specimen size. Nearly all of them are grafted on site. The nursery also offers boxwoods, beeches and a few other deciduous woodies.

Lone Elder's customers are mostly wholesalers, rewholesalers and landscapers throughout the United States.

"A lot of them are companies that have retail and do landscaping on the side," said Chris, who does the company's office work,

including accounts payable and receivable. "Most of our customers come to us every year. We know them and they know us, and we enjoy working with them."

The nursery's primary objective is to grow unusual or better selections and grow them well.

"The main goal is to get the customer happy," Angel said.

Welcome to the jungle

From when he was young, Tom wanted to own a farm. His grandfather, father and uncles all grew cotton, and he learned to drive the tractor at a very young age. He still loves working the dirt, as his wife, Chris, will attest.

"A good day for him is any day he can be on a tractor and a really good day is when he can be on two," she said. "If it's a muddy day, he's a really unhappy person."

Even as he pursued his medical career, he never gave up on his dream of farming.

Chris also worked in the health care field, as a respiratory therapist. She didn't grow up on a farm, but she acquired the love of farming by raising goats and llamas on the couple's property outside Portland. "I just like animals," she said.

Oregon's land use management is ➤

Lone Elder Nursery



designed to protect farmland and manage growth. It designates certain lands as urban or rural, based on location and soil quality. As cities grow, certain rural areas nearby can be designated for urbanization. This keeps the growth away from what is deemed to be priority farmland, but it can also bring urbanization to certain other areas where farming is active.

This happened to the Utterbacks twice. Suburbia moved in, and suddenly, they had neighbors who didn't understand farming.

"The first time we stayed, we were the last farm to sell," Chris said. "We got surrounded. It was impossible. People would cut the fence. They would use the pasture to dump their yard debris. A lot of it was poisonous for the goats and sheep."

They moved further away from Portland, but not far enough. Urbanization came knocking once more. "When the urban growth boundary changed again, we said, 'We're moving to exclusive farm use [protected] land,'" Chris said.

They also decided to raise trees rather than animals.

"(Trees) don't run away," Chris said. "You don't have to worry about fencing them in. And the only way you made money with the animals was with selling the babies. I didn't like selling the babies."

The Utterbacks began searching for property outside Portland's reach. One day they toured an old nursery several miles south of the exurb of Canby. "When we came to look at this property, we stopped in the driveway and got out and looked at the dirt, and grabbed a handful and said, 'Soil!' The Realtor thought we were crazy," Chris said.

They bought the place even though they could see it was overgrown. There, they founded their nursery on January 1, 2000.

But there were early obstacles. The former owner, Dick Bush of Bush's Nursery, had retired eight years earlier.

"And you know what happens in Oregon when you don't farm a place for eight years," Chris said. "It gets covered

in everything. We had to work on it a while to get it into shape."

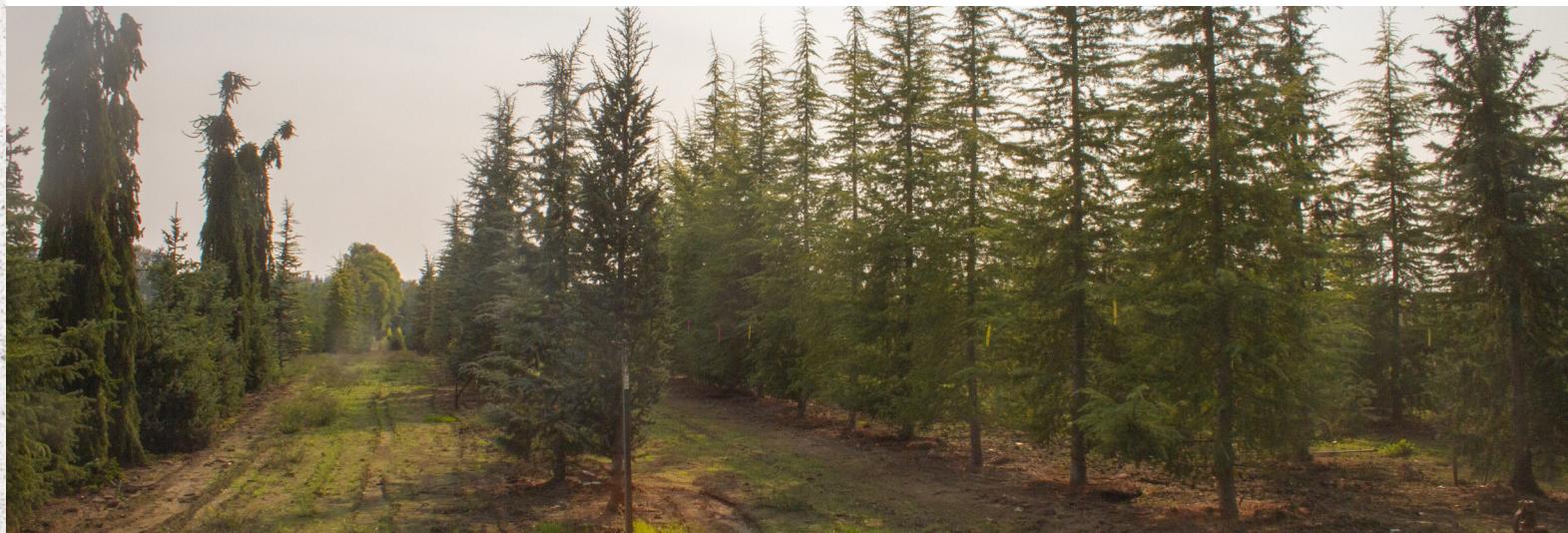
Tom realized his tractor work was cut out for him.

"Early on, we'd bring our friends over to see what we'd bought and they said, 'My God man, you're nuts,'" he said. "You could see what it was going to take to get it shaped up. There was a feed bunker on the other side of our house that I didn't find for two years because it was buried in blackberries. It was a bit of an investment to start with. We had to get a big excavator in to clear stuff and make burn piles."

Still, Bush had left behind a good collection of conifers beyond the typical offerings, plus dogwoods, beeches and various deciduous trees.

The Utterbacks started growing offerings from Bush's collection. Initially, they bought inexpensive liners to grow, but soon decided rare, hard to grow, and larger conifers should be their bread and butter.

They named the place Lone Elder





Nursery, not after the elderberry tree, which they don't sell anyway, but after the nearby unincorporated community of Lone Elder, which consists of a T-intersection and a country market.

Learning and succeeding

After Lone Elder Nursery was founded, Angel became the first employee. Although still just a teenager, he possessed the knowledge as well as the work ethic to dive right in.

"I come from a family of field workers," Angel said. "My dad, Raoul Perez, used to be a B&B digger. A lot of nurseries around will know his name. He worked for Bizon Nursery for years, from the 1980s, and Klupenger Nursery, and did grafting. I was with him all the time, because when I was 10, I started going out with him when he did work. My father really was my mentor." (Raoul passed away about five years ago.)

The Utterbacks quickly realized Angel

was someone to invest in and give greater responsibility.

"Angel was curious," Chris said. "He didn't just do his job — he would ask questions. He always wanted to know more about how to grow better trees. Even now he's always out talking to people."

The Utterbacks themselves had much to learn in the beginning, never having operated a nursery before. They sought advice anywhere they could find it.

Fortunately, the Oregon nursery indu-



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Lone Elder Nursery



try is rich in both knowledge, and people who are willing to share it generously.

"We went to an event that the Oregon State University Extension service put on about getting started in nurseries," Chris said. "Then we went to several OAN member open houses. The members were just very welcoming, very informative. They couldn't give us enough information and help. We decided we liked the people, and we liked growing trees."

In 2006, the Utterbacks made two major decisions. One was to promote Angel to nursery manager. "Without bragging, I think Angel is one of the top guys on conifers, what makes them grow better and how to do it right," Chris said.

The other decision was to expand, purchasing 7 adjacent acres from a neighbor.

"It was acreage they were using for a motorcycle track," Chris said. "When

Tom went over there, I wouldn't see him for days. He was over there terraforming."

The original acreage included 22 acres that is bottomland. This land is difficult to dig in, so they converted it into an arboretum where they can showcase several of their offerings on tours.

A growing enterprise

Over time, the nursery increased the number of plants it offers, and also the size.

"We will grow trees bigger than a lot of people do," Chris said. "We will sell 16-footers. We're not doing it as much, but we still have some specimen trees."

The larger trees have greater margins, as do the more unusual selections.

"It's forced us to be a little more cautious and a little more careful of what we plant," Chris said. "Being a small nursery, we do much better if we pick out a really

unusual plant and hearty tree rather than the ones people buy in bulk and need in the hundreds."

In that spirit, Lone Elder Nursery has developed a few of its own selections.

"Angel has found a few trees that we're getting good feedback on from across the country," Chris said. "We're always on the lookout for things with better color or shape, or tolerate shipping better. We have several of our own cultivars."

Those cultivars include *Cedrus deodara* 'Angel's Glauca Pendula', *C.d.* 'Dark Blue Angel', and the latest, *C.* 'Angel's Green Giant'. All were discovered in the field at Lone Elder, and Angel has heard positive response to the attributes of these selections. "The customers like them, so we keep producing more," he said.

A welcome change at the nursery has been the lengthening of the shipping season. The nursery used to send its last shipments of the season in June, but now the season has legs. In response, the nursery has added container material so it can ship at any time, and serve those customers who want or prefer it.

"We're finding more customers that like to ship in the summer," Chris said. "I'm sure we're not the only ones. This year, we just couldn't keep people supplied."

The benefit is there's always work to do. That's a positive for worker retention.

"The backbone of this industry is the farm workers, the field hands," Chris said. "We really appreciate them, and most of our people have been with us for many years. The nursery industry will always have ups and downs but, if you have good people working with you and enjoy the work, there is nothing as rewarding for us as good dirt and trees." ☐

