

MEET THE LEADER

The voices of Oregon's nursery industry

TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF

As a second-generation nursery owner, I grew up on a farm my father, Tom Verhoeven, started in 1983. My first job was filling flats for pocket change. Agriculture was just one of my interests as a kid, and my art teacher at West Albany High School encouraged me to keep working on my talents in visual arts. I applied to the Rhode Island School of Design — one of the oldest and best-known American colleges of art and design, and soon earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in illustration. I worked at several print and design jobs in Wisconsin, Georgia, and finally Portland, Oregon.

I headed back to the family farm with the news that my mother had fallen very ill. Returning to the Willamette Valley just felt natural. It was a good time for me to see how I could be closer to my family and also fit into the business. The design business has a lot of similarities to agriculture — creative thinking, exchanging ideas and giving feedback — so it was not too difficult to find my place. Now, my wife and I have been living on the farm for the past 10 years. About five years ago, my father fully retired and I took ownership of **Peoria Gardens**. This area was a wonderful place to grow up and I feel very fortunate to be able to raise our two kids here. We have a tremendous crew, many of whom have been here for decades. They are like our extended family.

WHAT'S YOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLE?

Respect. My father was a great mentor for not only me, but the whole team at Peoria Gardens. We all make sure mutual respect is a central element of the place we work.

WHAT'S A GOAL YOU HAVE YET TO ACHIEVE?

I hope to develop a strong preference for people in the workforce to consider Peoria Gardens a valuable employer. The farm currently has eight employees with over 20 years of service, and six employees with more than 30 years of service. That says a lot about what we do.



Ben Verhoeven
President
Peoria Gardens Inc.

OAN member since 2012

OAN roles/positions:

- OAN Board of Directors Executive Committee – member at large

WHAT'S THE BEST BUSINESS DECISION YOU'VE EVER MADE?

I'm glad we began learning about the Toyota Production System. We have been part of the Oregon Lean Consortium for a couple of years now, and we're getting everyone in the nursery involved. If there is any long-lasting mark I hope to leave on the business, it is to embed Lean into the DNA of our company.



HARDEST BUSINESS DECISION

We canceled a large greenhouse expansion at the last minute. We currently use five acres of greenhouse space in our operation, with another four acres of outdoor growing space. The plan was to add another greenhouse. Dropping out of the investment was both the hardest and the wisest choice. The project was well researched, but the motivation to build was just for the sake of expanding. That just wasn't good enough. It was a good lesson in pursuing growth for the right reasons.

WHO IS YOUR MOST SIGNIFICANT MENTOR?

While my father taught me many things, but he really engrained this idea that you will find your way into most spots in your life. He was a role model for how to find excitement and joy in almost any scenario, which opens the door to a world of great experiences.

BEST BUSINESS ADVICE:

"You are violating the rule of the span of control," my Small Business Development Center (SBDC) adviser once said to me. It changed everything and streamlined a lot of our business practices. If you have not reached out to the SBDC, I encourage you to do so. It is a federally funded program that will match you with an adviser at no cost.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT THE NURSERY INDUSTRY?

What other industry can say that their job is to increase the health, beauty and vitality of their communities?

WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST CHALLENGE?

Personally, my greatest challenge is patience. As a business, our greatest challenge is to bring the voice of the customer as close as possible to production. Compared to tree nurseries, our crop cycle times with seed-grown annuals are much shorter. That said, forecasting six months to a year out still leaves plenty of room for weather (or a pandemic!) to >>>

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disrupt that plan. We are working hard to find a better solution to adjust our production in response to customer demand.

WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO GO TO WORK EVERY DAY?

I spend my day collaborating with a great group of people, and I get up each morning with a desire to not let them down.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

How we have improved our selecting and shipping procedure an average of twice a year since 2015. It has taught us the value of teamwork and forward thinking. It has also been a lot of hard work and a lot of fun. The best and most lasting ideas have come from our team. I'm very proud of them.

INVOLVEMENT WITH OAN:

I joined the association in 2012. I was active in the Greenhouse Chapter (now the Retail and Greenhouse Chapter) and it's where I met a lot of great people in the industry. I was recently elected to serve on the OAN Board of Directors as a representative for the greenhouse sector, and I filled a vacancy of member-at-large on the Executive Committee.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT ARE THE MOST CRITICAL CHALLENGES FACING THE NURSERY INDUSTRY TODAY?

Government regulations and labor issues are common pitfalls for many businesses, but I personally also have an eye on the science of climate change. Unusual weather patterns in spring and water supply issues will continue to impact our industry. We have taken several steps to change our business operation to reduce energy use and grow better. Our greenhouses are equipped with solar panels, advanced greenhouse covers and high-efficiency heating systems to reduce our energy use. We also have a Social and Environmental Responsibility statement on our website to make sure our customers know that we do not use neonicotinoids or GMO seeds in our plants. ©