



OAN MEMBER PROFILE



PRODUCTION:

Greenhouse 100%

KNOWN FOR:

High quality, wholesale bedding plants, vegetables, herbs, containers, and baskets, grown with an environmental ethic

OAN MEMBERS SINCE:

1995

KEY PEOPLE

Brent and Becky Skiles, owners; **Renee Phelps**, chief operating officer; **Zach Phelps**, transportation and projects manager; **Jen Skiles**, finance and human relations manager; **Francisco Martinez**, head grower; **Becky Peterson**, sales manager; **Alex Sanchez**, production manager; **James Larson**, facilities and IT manager; **Bonnie Abbott**, container and basket design.

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LISTINGS:

1 NurseryGuide.com

Spring Creek Gardens Inc.

Founded: 1984 by Brent and Becky Skiles

BY CURT KIPP

WHO SAYS YOU can't go home? Certainly not Renee Phelps.

She has done it, moving back home to eventually take the operational reins at **Spring Creek Gardens Inc.**, a wholesale greenhouse operation located between Eugene and Junction City, Oregon.

But sometimes, home isn't quite the same as you remember it.

Back in the 1980s, the nursery was just a roadside produce stand. Renee spent her teen years there, selling fruits and vegetables one year to help pay for her college education

After college, she worked in the sporting goods industry for many years. When she finally did come home, in 2010, she found everything had changed.

The farm she where she came of age had become a thriving wholesale greenhouse operation — one that grew bedding plants, containers, baskets, vegetable starts and herb starts for retailers across Oregon and Washington. Customers now included Fred Meyer, a longtime regional chain that is part of retail giant Kroger Company, and Bi-Mart, a big regional chain with 79 stores.

The nursery also sold to independent stores and garden centers, including Jerry's

Home Improvement, a big player in the Eugene area. The farmhouse Renee used to live in was now the company headquarters.

"So I went back to work with my parents, live on the same property as my parents, and my old bedroom became my office at 40 years old," she said. "It was overwhelming to step into a business of this size and this complexity."

'Humble beginnings'

Renee's mother, Becky Skiles, remembers feeling overwhelmed herself. She and her husband, Brent Skiles, founded the business in 1984, leading it through all of the changes and growth.

"Sometimes I would stand out in the middle of the yard and watch the trucks and the shipping cards and the people with clipboards, everybody racing around doing their thing," she said. "And then inevitably the thought came to my mind, what have we created here? I don't think anybody had any idea that it would become what it has become."

They started out just wanting to have a fruit stand.

"And we did have a little fruit stand out under a big old black walnut tree, right alongside the highway," Becky said. "We ➤"



Spring Creek Gardens

Previous page: Several family members are involved in running Spring Creek Gardens Inc. They include (left to right) founders and owners Becky and Brent Skiles; their daughter, Chief Operating Officer Renee Phelps; their grandson, Transportation and Projects Manager Zach Phelps; and their daughter-in-law, Finance and HR Manager Jen Skiles. PHOTO BY BECKY PETERSON

Left: Hanging baskets fill the greenhouse space of Spring Creek. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

grew all of our own produce. We had big fields of tomatoes and other produce, and then we also began putting in U-pick berries — strawberries, raspberries.”

Early growth was modest but steady.

“I think the first year we sold product, we probably grossed right around \$2,000,” Becky said. “The next year, we doubled it — that only meant \$4,000.”

That amount of income wasn’t great for the work being invested, and costs were too high.

“We found that we could grow [everything] a lot cheaper if we started our own [vegetable] plants,” Becky said. “And so, we went to the Farm Service Agency and petitioned them for grant money to build greenhouses, and that got us started in the greenhouse business. That led from one thing to the next. We just decided that we would start growing plants.”

It was a bit daunting. Although Brent had grown up on a farm, it wasn’t a nursery — grasses, hay and corn were the crops. Becky didn’t grow up on a farm at all.

“We actually went into this without a background, which is highly unusual,” Becky said. “We learned as we went and took a lot of classes that were offered wherever we could find them, but never did go to college for horticulture.”

Once the decision was made to grow bedding plants, they needed customers.

“We had purchased all of our plastics and things for our greenhouses from Fred Meyer, so they seemed the logical people to approach about selling plants,” Becky said.

In those days, individual store managers had more discretion over where they sourced their plants. Becky and Brent talked to the Fred Meyer manager in Santa Clara, a community on the northern end of Eugene, located about three miles from the farm. The store agreed to stock Spring Creek’s plants.

Other stores followed. When managers were transferred to new stores, they would often call Spring Creek and bring them on as a supplier at that new location.

“One thing led to another and the fruit stand business finally went away and it became totally greenhouses,” Becky said. “So, pretty humble beginning.”

A key step in Spring Creek’s evolution was the hiring of head grower Francisco Martinez, who oversees crop health in all 60-plus greenhouses spread over two facilities. “He’s been with us for nearly 25 years, I believe, and we couldn’t function without him,” Becky said.

As husband and wife, Becky and Brent had a very definite division of labor in running the nursery. Brent focused on the operations side, while Becky worked on the financial end of things. Their skills complemented each other.

“I had a saying, and it is so appropriate: Brent saw the cookie; I saw the chocolate chips,” Becky said. “He looked at the big picture and I was the detail person. And it just worked. I think that’s probably our greatest accomplishment that we actually could stay married through that. We just celebrated 50 years last year.”

When Renee came home to help run the nursery, she worked under her parents for a transitional period. Brent retired from the nursery in 2014, and Becky scaled back her involvement over the following few years, putting Renee fully in charge of the day-to-day operations four years ago.

Renee still counts on her parents

for some key things. They still serve as owners. Her mom assists with the books about one day per month, and her dad is a sounding board.

“I still go back to Dad quite a bit for counsel,” Renee said. “He doesn’t want to be involved in the day-to-day operations, but he’s more than happy to help me with the big picture philosophical questions. Maybe that’s more valuable than anything else.”

Complexity pays off

Spring Creek today is a complex operation, producing a large number of plants in a large number of container sizes.

“We’re what they call a primary supplier to Bi-Mart and Fred Meyer,” Becky said. “And what that means, particularly with Bi-Mart, is that if they sell it in the store, we pretty much are on deck to produce it. The volume of varieties that we need to grow in any given season to meet the demands of the store, it’s kind of staggering.

“There’s every size, for example, of a bedding plant from jumbo pack, to 4-inch annual, 4¼-inch premium, and up to 6-inch. All those have to be produced here, and that’s just bedding plants. Then you’ve got all the sizes of vegetables ... you have to be able to fill every single one of those slots, on a consistent basis for the stores.”

The selection Spring Creek offers is deep, because customers demand it.

“We grow about 40 different varieties of tomatoes in three different container sizes — and that’s just tomatoes,” Becky said. “Some of our customers request that we grow 25–30 different colors of a single species, such as *Calibrachoa*, and we do our best to meet their specifications on all the crops.”

It’s a challenge to manage all the plants, colors and sizes.

“We bring in millions of plugs,” Becky said. “We grow to the customer’s specifications — I mean, down to the exact color that they want. And then those plantings have to be timed to be in color at a particular add date for the store. It’s complicated. It’s a huge amount to track.”

The benefit of all the work is a thriving company that customers can trust to

deliver what's needed.

"It has grown beyond our wildest expectations, which is a good thing," Becky said. "We've been able to give a lot of people employment, and we've been able to put plants everywhere, share the beauty."

Along the way, Spring Creek relied on the assistance of other growers, joining the Oregon Association of Nurseries in 1995 to network, build connections and learn. Renee has benefitted from these connections as well, since coming back. She's in regular contact with Jim Iwasaki at Iwasaki Bros., Ben Verhoeven at Peoria Gardens, and others.

"The Oregon nursery industry really is very, very cooperative," she said. "I have not been in the industry all that long, so I'm grateful for the support and help that I've gotten. Many of our competitors really have been very, very kind to me."

Growing for the future

While managing a complex operation, Spring Creek Gardens hews closely to a strong environmental ethic.

In accordance with the preferences of end consumers, Spring Creek's entire output is GMO-free, and the grower offers a variety of plants produced without neonicotinoids.

"For me, personally, environmental care is very important," Renee said.

Under Alex Sanchez, production manager, the nursery has reduced the use of pesticides in its growing operation, while increasing the use of biological controls.

"It's flipped to where we're spending about 70% of our insect control budget on biological controls, and maybe only 30% of it is spent on chemical controls now," Renee said. "He's done a fantastic job of implementing biological control programs so that our entire chemical usage has been completely upended."

The nursery also reuses and recycles plastics to the greatest extent possible — not just containers, but greenhouse coverings. Worn coverings on large houses are cut into smaller pieces and repurposed on smaller houses, until no more use can be had. When containers have reached the end of their useful life, they are cleaned, compacted, baled and returned to the >>

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Spring Creek Gardens

producer for recycling.

“We as the growers need to do our part to return the plastic to the recycler in a condition where they can process it again,” Renee said.

Energy efficiency is also important. The company worked with the Energy Trust of Oregon (ETO) to find opportunities for increased efficiency.

“When we worked with [ETO], it was primarily to put in root zone heating,” Becky said. “We also upgraded to high efficiency natural gas furnaces as well, but we’re really kind of a fan of the zone heating, because it delivers a good, warm envi-

ronment, right to the roots. Then we can actually grow the top of the plants at a colder ambient air temperature.”

This results in hardier plants.

“Because the hotter you grow, the plants, of course, the softer and the stretchier they get,” she said.

As an added bonus, the nursery can then avoid use of plant growth regulators (PGRs).

“My father actually started that,” Renee said. “He never was a big fan of PGRs and we feel that the plant performs better in the end for the consumer, if it’s not all stunted right out of the gate.”

A third generation of Spring Creek

In recent years, Zach Phelps — son of Renee and grandson of Becky and Brent — has become more involved in the nursery, making it a three-generation operation. The plan is for him to take over someday.

This wasn’t his chosen pathway, initially. As a high school student, Zach helped out at the nursery and loved doing it, but after graduation, he chose to become a welder. “But then I decided that maybe that wasn’t completely what I wanted to do,” he said.

So he returned to the farm.

Zach works on a variety of tasks, from equipment maintenance to truck routing to personnel, doing everything he can to learn everything he can about the nursery. He doesn’t regret his choice. “You never come to work and do the same thing two days in a row,” he said. “It’s always changing and always evolving.”

Spring Creek today employs 45 workers full time throughout the year, and that increases to 70 during the peak season. Half of the workers have been there seven or more years, and one-third have been there more than 10. Loyalty is important, and the nursery takes its responsibility to employees seriously.

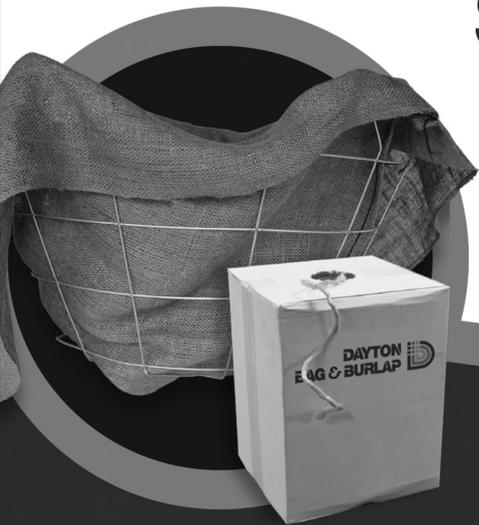
“When mom and dad started the business, they really put an emphasis on taking care of their employees, and trying to pay a living wage with good benefits,” Renee said. “We have health insurance. We pay our employees overtime, despite the agricultural exemption. Those are all things that Mom and Dad implemented when they were running the company. Myself, and hopefully Zach will follow. We really want to put a high priority on taking care of our employees.” ©

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

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