



VITAL DATA

PRODUCTION:

Perennials: 50%	<div style="width: 50%; background-color: #2e8b57; height: 10px;"></div>
Shrubs: 35%	<div style="width: 35%; background-color: #2e8b57; height: 10px;"></div>
Annuals: 10%	<div style="width: 10%; background-color: #2e8b57; height: 10px;"></div>
Tropicals: 5%	<div style="width: 5%; background-color: #2e8b57; height: 10px;"></div>

KNOWN FOR:

Wholesale grower of perennials, grasses, shrubs, vines, herbs and tender/hardy succulents delivered throughout the Northwest. Ornamental grass, perennial and succulent plugs shipped throughout North America.

PEOPLE

Lorne and Auralea Blackman, owners; **Kevin Brunot**, general manager; **Kris Gonzales**, production manager; **Alex Ramos**, operations manager; **Ashlie McNERNEY**, greenhouse manager

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LISTINGS:

160 NurseryGuide.com

Walla Walla Nursery Co. Inc.

Founded in 1992 by Lorne Blackman

BY CURT KIPP

MANY BUSINESS OWNERS talk about delivering for their customers, but Lorne Blackman sometimes takes it literally.

The **Walla Walla Nursery Co.** owner will hop in a truck loaded with wholesale perennials, ornamental grasses, shrubs, annuals and other plants, and deliver to some of the garden centers that make up the bulk of his customers.

“It’s fun to see their reaction when they realize it’s the owner,” Lorne said.

His wife and business partner, Auralea Blackman, sees the benefit of having Lorne in direct contact with the retailers.

“He gets to see the product on the other end,” she said. “He gets to meet those customers and see what they have, and see what kind of quality they’re looking for. And he’s very good about making notations and paying attention.”

Walla Walla Nursery Co. serves independent garden centers in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Northern Nevada and Northern California, delivering about two-thirds of its production numbers to them on company trucks every week. The remaining plants are purchased by rewholesalers.

“It’s all just listening to customers and trying to meet their requests,” Lorne said. “Currently, we have more market than we

have production capacity.”

The nursery is situated on the Washington-Oregon border, with some acreage on each side of Stateline Road.

Being located east of the Cascade Range is somewhat of an anomaly for a Northwest wholesale nursery, but there are a few others with operations east of the mountains, including J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. (a farm in Milton-Freewater, Oregon) and Bailey (a farm in Sunnyside, Washington).

The advantage for Walla Walla is that the plants are more acclimated for the Intermountain region (Boise, Salt Lake, Bend, etc.) and perform better in those markets.

According to General Manager Kevin Brunot, product diversity is Walla Walla’s calling card. Retailers can get all of what they need without having to meet multiple minimum order requirements at different wholesale growers.

“We’re kind of a one-stop shop,” he said. “Between annuals, grasses, perennials, vegetables, and shrubs, we’re pretty well all inclusive. The only piece we’re missing at this point is trees.”

Learning the business

Lorne grew up in Walla Walla, Washington and is a fourth-generation

Walla Walla Nursery Co. Inc.

Previous page: The office team at Walla Walla Nursery Co. includes (far right) owners Auralea and Lorne Blackman and general manager Kevin Brunot. **This page:** Workers rack up plants for the next shipment.

PHOTO BY CURT KIPP



resident there. His grandfather worked for the railroad company, which is echoed in the model railroads Lorne incorporates into his Farwest Show booth. His father was in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

After high school, Lorne attended Washington State University, graduating with a bachelor of science degree in forestry. The lack of work in that field led him to pursue an internship and eventually a full time job with **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.** in 1986.

Lorne worked at the company's Cottrell container farm, which is located at the company headquarters in Boring, Oregon, near Portland. This is where Lorne learned a great deal of his nursery craft.

"A lot of the principles of quality growing got cemented in my head at that time," Lorne said. "(Production manager Gerard Dosba) said, 'When you stand at the end of a

row of trees, you should only see one tree.'"

Initially, Lorne thought this was silly, but he soon realized it was a way to ensure attention was paid to consistent quality and form. "It didn't take long before it clicked with me, and it became a challenge to do that," he said.

With Schmidt, Lorne also learned to supervise others. "There were times when I was running most of the farm up to a hundred people," he said. "I learned how to separate supervisory responsibility from personal friendships and buddy-buddy type stuff. That was big."

The experience transformed his career.

"It was my first real job that was more than just a summer internship in forestry," Lorne said. "I couldn't have done [Walla Walla Nursery] without having [Schmidt] as a stepping stone."

After five years at Schmidt, on the

west side of Oregon, Lorne moved back to Walla Walla and enrolled in the irrigation technology program at Walla Walla Community College.

"I hoped to find a place with Boise Cascade's fiber farms which they were putting in in the Wallula area," Lorne said. These farms raised fast-growing cottonwood trees for paper. "That [job] fell through, fortunately as it turned out, as the whole operation is now long gone."

Spectacular growth

Long intrigued by what he might accomplish by starting his own business, Lorne founded Walla Walla Nursery Co. in 1992. "I ended up taking a job at a local garden center while I began the nursery business on the side," he said.

The initial plan was to grow native plants. "I was looking for some big contracts," he said. "I've since found those aren't real sustainable, or not regular. Selling a diversity of products to garden centers is much more sustainable and predictable."

Although Lorne didn't have a farming background growing up, his wife, Auralea, did. Also a fourth-generation resident of the Walla Walla area, her parents were farmers with Italian and German roots. The couple married in 1994.

The Blackmans' nursery grew slowly in the early days, but took off around the year 2000. The nursery had just three employees then. It has 190 at peak season now.

"Transitioning from a small mom-and-pop operation to a self-sustaining business was a much more challenging process than I would have imagined," Lorne said. "I didn't have a solid plan. I keep telling our people we've been making it up as we go for 28 years."

The move from native plants to more traditional retail nursery material was the first big step.

"When I was working at the garden center, I discovered the benefits of perennials — quick turns, easy sell," Lorne said. "So, we started adding a lot of perennials and then we created a special focus on ornamental grasses. We're still well known for that."

The company then added woody shrubs



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Walla Walla Nursery Co. spans more than 50 acres of production space on both sides of the Washington-Oregon border, and is a hotbed of activity all season. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

to the lineup because customers were asking for them. The company did well with them until the Great Recession, which hit in 2007, “and there went the shrubs,” Lorne said. “Since then, they’ve come back in on a much larger scale.”

For a time, Walla Walla was growing containerized trees as well, but they were constantly tipping over in the wind, and were troublesome to ship, so the company dropped them. More recently, they added annuals three years ago and then houseplants last year, both of which are doing very well.

In recent years, Walla Walla has been simplifying its product line. For example, instead of carrying 150 hostas, they’re selling 20 or 30 different ones. The company seeks feedback from 10–15 of its top customers every year by inviting them to an open house.

The company also started growing

Proven Winners (PW) Color Choice shrubs about eight years ago, and now grows PW perennials and annuals, too. The company became a PW Gold Key grower this year. “I think Proven Winners are more than 20% of our product line now, by volume, and rising,” he said.

The company is a network grower for Bailey as well, offering First Editions shrubs, Endless Summer hydrangeas and Easy Elegance roses.

A key turning point for the business was establishing an annual operating line of credit with Northwest Farm Credit Services, which boosted the company’s growth. Learning to batch crops was also huge. It enabled the company to time product readiness for weekly deliveries, thereby extending the selling season. The addition of the company’s own trucks and drivers also enabled this.

To feed the growth, the company has

acquired various adjacent parcels over the years, basically anytime a neighbor was ready to sell.

For a division of labor, Lorne has focused on the growing and operations side of the business, while Auralea has made her mark in the areas of graphics, printing, information technology and marketing. “I’ve tried to make us a little more IT-oriented than a lot of nurseries,” she said.

The nursery’s information services (IS) team led the creation of a virtual white board showing the status of every order, from picking to cleaning to loading. “It helps a lot,” Auralea said. “We even have WiFi in the field, so we can do inventory on the fly. You can stand right out there and change inventory in real-time.”

Assisting on the inventory process has been Kevin Brunot, who joined the company three years ago after several years run- ➤




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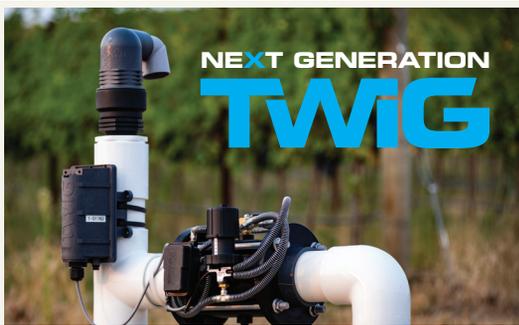
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Walla Walla Nursery Co. Inc.

A dusting of spring snow coats the Blue Mountains of Oregon, overlooking the fields of Walla Walla Nursery Co. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

ning his own nursery. He has helped streamline a number of the company's processes, including sales, and was rewarded with a promotion to general manager this spring.

"It's been a real pleasure growing, and I hope to continue to do great things within the company," he said.

Also recently promoted was Alex Ramos, who joined the company as a facilities manager after working in the snack foods industry for several years and in a variety of roles. He was recently made operations manager and enjoys a different challenge almost every day.

"Who am I going to help out? Or how am I going to contribute to this?" he said. "And I see it as my own business. It's just no natural to be out in the field one day and then the [next] day working on paperwork. This would be more pleasant than the food production line. I'm enjoying every second of it."

A path to the future

As they navigate business and chart a path to the future, Lorne and Auralea draw upon their Christian worldview, along with a strong sense of personal responsibility.

"Things like loyalty and honesty are very, very important," Auralea said.

The Blackmans are proud of the product that they create, not as a matter of ego, but because their customers rely on that product, and their team relies on a healthy business.

"We're here to serve our customers," Lorne said. "I like the diagram that shows the three parts of a successful business — customer interests, profit interests and employee interests, and where those overlap. That's where we want to operate."

In that spirit, Lorne and Auralea are also looking at transitioning the nursery to employee ownership.

"It doesn't seem right to start a business, to hire people that count on you, and then just retire and shut down the business," Lorne said.

"Or pass it off to some corporation that doesn't care. That's the last thing we want," Auralea added.

Moving to employee ownership enable the Blackmans to retire.

"We want to make sure that if something happens to us, that the employees are cared for, that the business continues, and it's not about us," Auralea said. "It's about everybody else as well."

"Humility is the key to the whole, to everything, to all of life," Lorne said. ©

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

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