



Mike Darcy

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An endless source of joy

MAURICE HORN and Mike Smith founded **Joy Creek Nursery** in 1992 with a simple motto: “We are creating the nursery we always wanted.” Sadly, after almost 30 years, it was announced in October that, Joy Creek Nursery would close on November 7, 2021.

Much has changed since 1992 when they opened a specialty nursery in a rural community 18 miles outside of Portland. Scappoose was the designated location because Mike Smith had a 40-acre farm there and part of that farm could be used for a nursery.

The town also had a population of only about 4,000. Mike and Maurice knew that to create a successful nursery, it would require a unique appeal to attract gardeners from throughout the area. The name Joy Creek came from the name of the creek that runs through the property.

Of the 40-acre farm, the nursery occupied seven acres, including a display garden, stock fields, a retail center and growing space. Initially, Joy Creek Nursery began as a mail order nursery and then grew to include both retail and online sales, as well as a garden design and installation department.

They felt from the beginning that a display garden would be essential to show customers how their plants would grow in this climate. Maurice said that while mail order was initially the primary focus, potential customers started stopping by to see the gardens and to buy plants. Thus, the retail sales area was born, and like any newborn, it grew over the years.

The business responsibilities were divided between Maurice and Mike. Landscape and maintenance divisions were added, with separate crews for each, and these became Mike’s responsibility. Maurice oversaw retail sales, plant propagation and production, and prepared the contents of the annual catalog.

Mail order to destination nursery

In those early days, a printed catalog was the primary way that nurseries were able to sell their plants through mail order. A printed catalog was often the only source for customers to learn what plants were available. This was especially true for a nursery like Joy Creek that was introducing new plants each year.

The 70-plus page catalog descriptions were so complete and well written that they not only enticed gardeners to purchase these new plants, but even read like an encyclopedia of plants. In fact, the arrival of the Joy Creek catalog soon became a much-anticipated spring tradition. Today, with the internet and extensive websites for nurseries, catalogs are on the wane.

Joy Creek Nursery soon became a destination specialty nursery for many gardeners from Portland and the surrounding areas. Maurice was forever on the lookout for new plants to add to the inventory. His insatiable quest for introducing gardeners to new plants resulted in tremendous growth of the catalog and customer base. Maurice not only introduced new plants, but he also re-introduced many older plants that were often difficult to find.

The four-acre display garden became

an essential element to showcase the new plants. Customers could actually see plants growing in a natural setting — they no longer had to rely on a description from a catalog or plant label.

In some ways, the display garden became a laboratory of plants and how they performed. There were failures and successes, and gardeners could observe both. Sometimes leaves would scorch from the sun on plants that were marketed as being able to take full sun. Other times, shade plants would be reaching out for more sun. It was all there on display for the public to see.

As the nursery grew and the plant selection became broader, Maurice began to group plants into collections of the same genus and soon had collections of hydrangeas, penstemons, clematis, hardy fuchsias, and ornamental grasses.

In view of the closing of the nursery, Maurice is concerned that they have not found buyers for the collections, and he is afraid some of the varieties may be lost. The collections were frequently featured in his many presentations. Maurice was often a presenter at the Northwest Flower & Garden Show in Seattle, as well as the Yard, Garden & Patio Show in Portland. He was a sought-after speaker for many garden organizations and was a presenter at the inaugural Plant Nerd Night in 2001. He continued to be a frequent repeat presenter at that event.

Operating a nursery or garden center, or a combination of the two, is hard work. Ask any nursery person and they will attest to this. There are so many ➤



Top: Joy Creek Nursery served customers from Scappoose, Oregon. **Bottom:** Hydrangeas in early November in the display garden at Joy Creek Nursery. PHOTOS BY RICH BAER

What I'm Hearing

Left: A bed of *Rudbeckia* in early November in the display garden at Joy Creek Nursery.

Right: *Penstemon* 'Wine Kissed' in early November in the display garden at Joy Creek Nursery. PHOTOS BY RICH BAER.

different factors that are beyond their control. Maurice told me that they have had to deal with their well running dry twice, ice storms, snow, freezing winds and temperatures, the feeding of elk and deer, the intense heat of this past summer, lack of rain, and the economics of the time. If all of that was not sufficient to dampen one's dreams, then there was COVID-19.

A time of transition

After working 12 months a year, seven days a week and all of the elements they had to deal with, Mike and Maurice, both 72 years old, felt it was time to make some lifestyle changes. This was sad news for the gardening community but certainly understandable.

The loss of Joy Creek Nursery creates a large void for gardeners, but there are still some excellent mainstream garden centers,



as well as other outstanding specialty nurseries. These include Gossler Farms Nursery in Springfield, Sebright Gardens in Salem, Dancing Oaks Nursery in Monmouth, Xera Plants in Portland, Cistus Nursery on Sauvie Island and Far Reaches Farm in Port Townsend, Washington.

Maurice once said, "Plants are my life." Now he has time to breathe new life into the plants in his own garden. Best wishes to

Maurice and Mike on this new adventure in their lives and in all their future endeavors. They and Joy Creek will be missed, but hopefully they will still be active in our local horticulture community.

Nurseries may go away, but the people behind them are never forgotten. Maurice and Mike will not be allowed to disappear from the memories and thoughts of local gardeners. ☺



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