



“Grimming” is the tedious but important combined task of grading and trimming rooted cuttings freshly dug from the propagation beds. From left, Soledad Lopez leads the way in employee longevity with 22 years, followed by Veronica Lopez with nearly 15 years and Elidia Melesio with 3.5 years at J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

✔ The HR Issue:  

Now hiring — hopefully

The lingering pandemic finds nurseries getting creative to fill vacancies

BY JON BELL

JONATHAN PEDERSEN, chief executive officer (CEO) and president at **Monrovia Nursery Co.** (Azusa, California), has watched as the labor market in the nursery industry has changed over the years. But this summer, with the global pandemic still overshadowing everyday life, vaccine mandates throwing in wrenches here and there, and extended unemployment benefits keeping many workers at home rather than at work, some truly startling signs of change showed up.

While on a mountain biking trip in Utah, Pedersen passed a McDonald’s that was hiring at above minimum wage and offering health benefits and a 401(k). And in Oregon, a McDonald’s in McMinnville got some press when, desperate for workers, it advertised jobs starting at \$15 an hour for 14- and 15-year-olds.

“When you see the local McDonald’s in McMinnville hiring teenagers for wages like that, you think, ‘Huh, something’s changed,’” said Petersen, whose company includes growing operations in California, Oregon, Connecticut and Georgia. “It’s a real challenge

out there. The demand for labor all over the place is way up.”

Not that the nursery industry is necessarily competing with fast-food companies for workers. But it is finding itself in an incredibly tight labor market, and that’s tough for an industry that has almost always battled workforce constraints. The situation has been compounded even more through an increase in demand for plants as people have turned to landscaping and gardening while they’ve been staying closer to home during the pandemic.

As a result, nurseries are having to make workforce adjustments to keep up with the new demand. They’re moving crews around, paying more and even automating, all in an effort to keep plants going into and coming out of the ground.

“Like most any business I know of, we have struggled with having enough help to get our work done,” said Shane Brockshus, chief operating officer (COO) for **Bailey Nurseries**, the St. Paul, Minnesota-based grower with additional growing operations in Oregon, Washington, Georgia and Illinois. “Navigating the 

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extremes of our weather in the last year — fires last September, ice in February, drought and extreme heat this summer — has not helped the situation. I will say in challenging times you really see the strength of your core staff shine. That core group of ours, and their dedication, has been so impressive to me.”

Pandemic problems

The COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on almost all employment in the U.S., with record job losses at the national level. Here in Oregon, nonfarm employment dropped by 285,200 jobs or 14.5% in March and April of 2020 as the pandemic hit, according to the Oregon Employment Department. In just those two months, one out of every seven jobs in Oregon was either temporarily or permanently lost.

In 2019, the nursery industry in Oregon employed nearly 9,200 workers and had an annual payroll of almost \$348 million. When the pandemic hit, nurseries didn't necessarily see mass layoffs and furloughs the way some industries, like hospitality and restaurants, did. But there was a period of uncertainty when it wasn't clear whether nurseries, garden centers and other related businesses would be allowed to operate during the early months of COVID — the prime springtime months for the industry. The U.S.-Mexico border also closed, making it harder for laborers with H-2A visas to get into the country when their help was needed most.

But after the initial dust settled, many states, including Oregon, declared that garden centers and nurseries were essential businesses and allowed them to operate. That was great news for nurseries, but as demand from homebound landscapers and gardeners grew, so too did the labor market tighten.

“With the pandemic, we also had quite a few seasonal workers who decided to go back to Mexico and who haven't come back,” Pedersen said.

Hiring struggle

Pam Evans, human resources manager for wholesale grower **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.** (Boring, Oregon), said the company

Top: Experienced crew members on the J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. container loading dock load Rivers Purple Beech. They include (from left and facing the camera), Jose Morales (six years), Carlos Sanchez (7 years) and Uber Aguilar (6 years); Luis Gonzalez is pushing the hand truck.

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

Bottom: J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. relies on skilled staff for field production.

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.



had about 400 employees in mid-September. It was set to ramp up to about 500 a few weeks after that, but Evans said the company wasn't expecting that to be an easy lift.

“We are struggling to hire,” she said. “Once we got over the hump of COVID, we hoped it would get better, but it really hasn't improved.”

Evans said staff is short at all their farms, including additional locations in Canby and in Milton-Freewater. The company hasn't lost a significant number of employees during the pandemic — steady demand from customers allowed the company to keep people on the payroll without disruption — but there have been some

retirements and some employees who have moved away. Finding their replacements is proving difficult.

“It's so different from back when I started,” Evans said. “We constantly had a stream of people coming into HR back then. Now, it's been months since we've hired anyone.”

Like J. Frank Schmidt, **Alpha Nursery** near Salem hasn't lost a ton of folks during the pandemic. But what it has seen, according to assistant manager Josh Zielinski, is a bit more inconsistency in terms of attendance. That's likely due to the fact that workers, like everyone else, have been trying to juggle daycare, schooling and other





J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. crew members work in the field. PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

family responsibilities in an environment of ongoing uncertainty.

“Attendance is the bigger issue for us,” Zielinski said. “It’s nothing blatant or malicious. Kids were out of school. People need to leave to take care of things. We understand that and we have done our best to accommodate it, but it’s challenging.”

Beyond the pandemic’s impacts on the nursery labor market, other factors have been at play as well. Pedersen said competition for workers has risen in Oregon in recent years as sectors like cannabis and wine have boomed. The aging workforce phenomenon continues to cause challenges,

as do immigration issues and even the current supply chain delays that have impacted the entire world.

For example, Pedersen says a shortage of plastic pots is hampering all U.S. growers at present. Pots that were supposed to arrive at Monrovia in late August had yet to show by the end of September because the ship first got stuck in the Panama Canal and then had to make an extended stop in Mexico. While Monrovia was waiting for its pots, it moved crews elsewhere to tend to other work. When the pots do arrive, the workers will have to be moved back to unload and catch up.

“The supply channel issues are rampant, and they do affect labor,” Pedersen says.

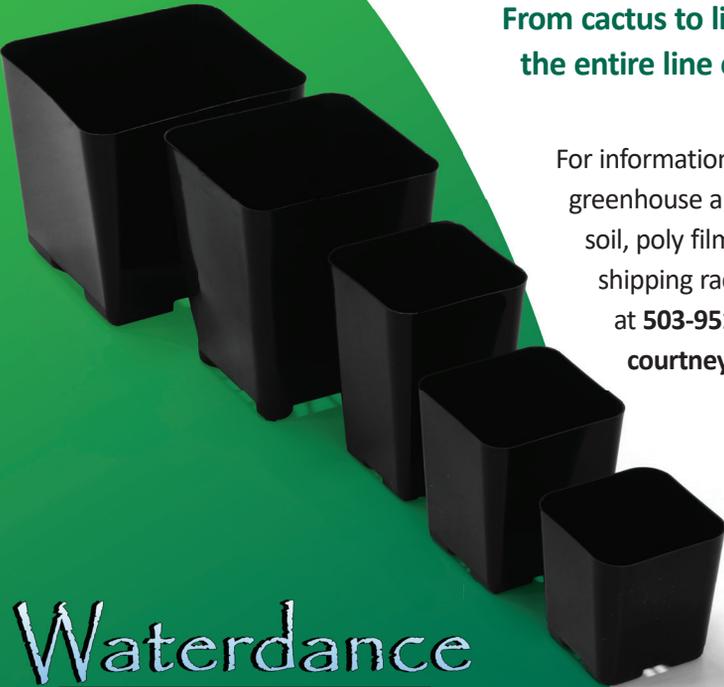
The solution spectrum

Nurseries are taking a multi-pronged approach to help address their workforce concerns. That starts with offering solid wage and benefits packages. Some nurseries have turned to hiring or referral bonuses. At J. Frank Schmidt, Evans says the nursery has been moving schedules around to try and even out the workload; it’s also shifted employees to different work locations with the same intent in mind.

Nurseries have also turned to local colleges and universities to try and develop new workers through internship programs and other opportunities. Those efforts have been successful to some degree, but many schools have cut back their horticulture >>

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J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co staff harvest trees in the spring. PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.



programs in recent years, which reduces the talent pool even more.

Automation continues to play a larger role in nurseries as well. That's likely to continue, especially if the labor crunch lingers.

"Automation is no longer just about payback via efficiencies, but facing the reality that we may not have people there to do the work otherwise," Brockshus said.

Longer term, the labor issue is going to need some bigger-picture fixes to smooth things out. For starters, guest worker programs need to be improved in order to make them more effective. Increased housing options for workers in rural areas could also help, as could shifting to a model that finds nurseries hiring fewer seasonal workers and more full-time ones.

"We need to be an attractive place to work," Pedersen said, "and I would way prefer to pay a living wage and pay them to work year-round so that they can have a steady career here at Monrovia."

Brockshus also said that creating a workplace culture that is attractive to employees can go a long way in encouraging people to come and work for a nursery — and to stick around.

"I think that culture is very important, especially in a competitive environment," he said. "Being a family business, like so many in our industry, does bring some important values that matter. I think our culture is why we have so many 20-, 30-, even 40-year employees that have gone through cycles of good and hard years with the business." ☺

Jon Bell is an Oregon freelance journalist who writes about everything from Mt. Hood and craft beer to real estate and the great outdoors. His website is www.jbellink.com.



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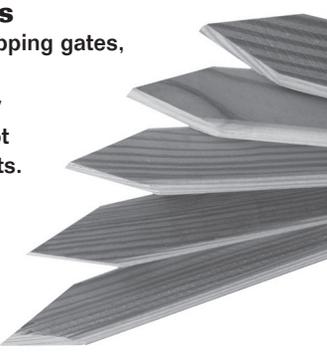
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