



From left, Vince and Kathy Engel (with Nala) operate a 5-acre nursery.
PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

OR PART 4

GROWER PROFILE



Engel's Evergreens LLC

OWNERS:

Vince and Kathy Engel, owners.

KNOWN FOR:

Dwarf fruit trees, shade and flowering trees, and holiday greens products such as wreaths, swags, arrangements and centerpieces.

PEOPLE:

Quentin Engel, supervisor;
Nala, mascot

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Engel's Evergreens LLC

Founded: 1984 by Vince and Kathy Engel

DO YOU ENJOY the unexpected? Welcome to Engel's Evergreens LLC, where fruit trees are the leading product.

You read that right. Despite being called "Engel's Evergreens" — a name based on the Christmas wreaths they also sell — fruit trees are the main bread and butter for the nursery and owners Vince and Kathy Engel. Shade and flowering trees are also part of the portfolio.

For Vince and Kathy, it's all part of the nursery's long tale of perseverance, adaptability and keeping a positive outlook.

"As Kathy said, 'The glass is half full,'" Vince said. "There's always a positive way to look at it. And bigger isn't always better because it's not necessarily going to be more profitable."

The nursery's Christmas business used to generate \$250,000 in sales, but margins were low, so the couple cut back on that side to focus more on fruit, shade and flowering trees. These are grown from the liner stage to the market stage for about a year, then sold to garden centers.

"We try to keep it turned so that we don't have a big capital investment," Vince said.

Most of Engel's trees are sold in 5-, 7- and 10-gallon containers, with the 5s making up the bulk. The fruit trees are mostly

dwarf and semi-dwarf selections, including peach, apple, pear, nectarine, apricot, cherry, plum and fig.

"The true dwarf trees are only going to be maybe five or six feet tall, or there are some apple varieties that are columnar that are going to be only maybe three feet wide and six feet tall or eight feet tall," Vince said.

They also offer combination and espaliered versions of some of these.

"Those can go in a small yard as well," Kathy said.

Small fruit and berry bushes are also offered — raspberries, gooseberries, blackberries and currants, as well as grapes. These were added to the mix due to customer requests.

"People were starting to go back to the 'victory garden' thinking — grow my own fruit, my own vegetables and stuff, especially now with the pandemic," Kathy said.

"The last two springs [2020 and 2021], we sold out of everything and we've dipped into next year's crop already," Vince said.

The nursery employs six year-round workers, plus seasonal workers as needed. Kathy works in the office, including billing, payroll, order entry and some sales. Vince works outside, serving as his own head grower, essentially. He plans production, orders supplies, maintains equip- >>



ment, manages inventory and is the main person on sales. Their young adult son, Quentin, works on equipment and other tasks as needed.

In the beginning

The unexpected has defined Engel's Evergreens from the beginning. In fact, the nursery started out as Engel's Liner Nursery — but first, the story before the story.

Kathy grew up on a farm west of Salem, Oregon. Upon graduation from South Salem High School, she enrolled at Oregon State University and graduated with a bachelor's of science in horticulture in 1981.

Vince grew up in rural Illinois. His parents were both teachers — his mother taught home economics, and his father

taught agricultural studies and advised the Future Farmers of America at the school. They also owned a hog farm about 80 miles west of Chicago, until misfortune struck.

"My dad passed away when I was 4," Vince said. "And so, my mom sold the farm, and we moved to town."

After high school, Vince attended the University of Illinois, just as his parents had. "I've got a forestry degree, and [during my studies], I took a plant identification class," he said. "Mike Dirr was the professor. He's a well-known plant geek. So, I had him for his last year at Illinois, before he went on sabbatical and then moved to Georgia."

According to Vince, Dirr's big tree and shrub reference was 250 pages when he was at Illinois, then doubled in size

when he moved to Georgia because the state is two zones warmer.

At that time, Vince also left Illinois, but he headed in a different direction — to Oregon. "I got tired of looking at the corn and bean fields," Vince said. Having visited Oregon with his brother, Vince decided to seek an opportunity in the Beaver State, and found it in an old friend.

"I'd worked at a garden center in Aurora, Illinois," he said. "The sales manager moved out here and he became the sales manager for Amfac Nurseries in Oregon, [which at the time owned] **Glenn Walters Nursery**. And so, I called him up and he said, 'Send me your resume.' And I moved out six weeks later."

At Glenn Walters, Vince became the inventory manager for the nursery. There,



he met Kathy, who was working as the inventory clerk. They were in their mid 20s.

“Yeah, he was my boss,” Kathy said.

A relationship developed and the two started their nursery in 1984 before marrying in 1985. They began their business venture on two acres of rented property and located in Hillsboro, Oregon, about 12 miles away from where they would ultimately locate their nursery.

“I was tired of working for somebody else,” Kathy said. “I was raised on a vegetable farm, so I always worked. The family worked for itself. I never had to work for anybody else. I thought I wanted to get back to that and start my own business again.”

In 1985, they purchased a five-acre flag lot of their own near the small town of Gaston, in the Tualatin Valley, but they didn’t move their nursery to it until 1987, when their lease at the other place expired.

Initially, their nursery was a propagation nursery called Engel’s Liner Nursery. The couple foresaw that plant demand was going up due to higher demand, and they were hoping to tap into the opportunity. They knew growers needed material to grow. Liners made that easier.

“The industry had just recovered from the early 1980s, with high inflation and everything,” Vince said. “Things were starting to build up again to where people were looking for plants and starts to expand their nurseries.”

Starting off, the nursery propagated a variety of shrubs and sold them to wholesale growers, both in Oregon and out of state. They were growing azaleas, arborvitae, boxwood, heather, spruce, cypress, *Pieris*, rhododendron, potentilla, spirea and more, but these were just small, rooted cuttings in 2-inch and 4-inch square pots. After raising them, they applied some hustle to get them sold. The tenor of business then was much more formal, and they had to act the part.

“It was a different time then, because at the **Farwest Show**, you went in a coat and tie to get East Coast business or Midwest business, which is a lot different from what it is now,” Vince said. >>



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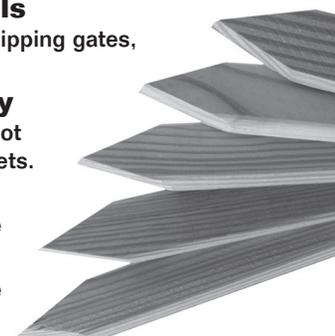
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In 1987, the Engels added a new product to their business plan. They began to make Christmas wreaths and other holiday products. The greens were stored in a cooler until ready for market.

Growers often benefit by adding to their product lines, but in this instance, the move backfired at first, due to an unexpected misfortune. On a Saturday evening in November after everyone had quit working, a thunderstorm came through and knocked out power to the cooler, which was normally set to 38 degrees to protect the product.

“When I checked the cooler on Monday morning, it was 65 degrees,” Vince said.

“The wreaths were in there, so we lost \$30,000 worth of product,” Kathy said. “So, as a result of that, bank loans weren’t paid off timely, and the bank said, ‘You’ve got to get a real job,’ basically. So that’s how Vince ended up at another nursery.”

With Vince taking a day job, Kathy became the main engine behind the business.

“Our son was born the year after that, in 1994,” she said. “I continued to do propagation, and then I did some ground covers, too.”

They also continued with the wreaths and other holiday goods. Those became a successful line. They sold some to retailers, but most go to fundraising groups. “Boy Scouts, schools, church groups, sports

teams — any nonprofit that wants to make money for their cause,” Kathy said.

Forced to adapt again

Taking a day job was a boon for Vince’s career. He started at Thompson and Walters Nursery, which was taken over by the Berry Family of Nurseries. He continued successfully under that ownership, working his way up to general manager of the company’s Oregon properties.

“I’d worked for Glenn and Viola [Walters], but I also worked for Bob Berry. He used to have nurseries here, and he bought the nursery,” Vince said. “His main nurseries were in Oklahoma, and the Berry Family of Nurseries had acquired seven





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nurseries across the country. Oregon was unique because it grows the maples and the blue star junipers and all that stuff that everybody wants. He had nurseries in Michigan, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Tennessee and Florida, and within a 300-mile radius of each of the nurseries, he could drop material to 75% of the country.”

But the Great Recession interrupted the winning streak for both Engel’s and for the Berry Family of Nurseries. “The thing that drove [Bob Berry] to sell was the fuel prices in 2009, 2010 were so expensive,” Vince said.

The problems weren’t limited to Berry. The stock market crashed, unemployment skyrocketed and the demand for plant material dried up, in part due to the evaporation of demand for new housing. “Pretty much nobody ordered anything,” Vince said.

Vince was laid off from Berry as sales plummeted at Engel’s — a double blow for the family. They were left figuring out what to do next.

“We contacted a friend of Kathy’s and asked what he needed, and he said, ‘Fruit trees,’” Vince said. “So, we started growing fruit trees, and we’ve added shade and flowering trees to that.”

They ceased to be a propagation nursery, choosing instead to grow from liners. Kathy was happy to take propagation out of her portfolio, having done it for close to 20 years.

“I said, ‘I’m done with those greenhouses.’ In the winter, you’ve got to come and knock the snow off, and in the summer, they’re hot, and you’ve got to keep everything watered and the mist running,” she said. “It wasn’t easy. It was evident to me that fruit trees, shade trees became easier to maintain.”

At this point, the name of the nursery changed from Engels Liner Nursery to Engel’s Evergreens LLC.

“And the Evergreens is because of the Christmas product,” Vince said.

The Engels sold their new fruit and shade tree product initially through Kathy’s friend, and primarily into the mountain states — Idaho, Utah, >>



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Engel's Evergreens LLC

Montana and Wyoming. They gradually shifted to retail garden centers as their primary customer. They rode the long economic recovery that began around 2012.

But adversity wasn't finished with the Engels. The family of three was driving along Highway 99W near Amity, Oregon, in December of 2016 and got into a motor vehicle accident.

“There was a 19-year-old, and he was on his phone texting and he ran a stop sign at 60,” Kathy said. “He hit us head on.”

The Engels have all recovered, but Vince does not get around as well as he did previously. They persevere through the ever-present challenges of running a nursery.

“Labor gets to be a challenge,” Vince said. “Shipping costs. And then, another challenge that is starting to creep in is suppliers and customers that are closing due to retirement. We’ve lost two or three suppliers of trees that we’ve gotten, because nobody in the family wanted to keep the business going.”

They’ve lost customers this way as well — retailers that have shut down due to retirement. “If they can’t sell a retail garden center to somebody, they just sell the land to somebody for a subdivision,” Kathy said.

Association involvement is key

Over the years, the Engels have made time to contribute to the Oregon Association of Nurseries. They chaired multiple annual conventions and have spent time in chapter leadership.

They see the value of involvement. “The OAN is big with lobbying for agriculture and on legislation,” Vince said.

Along the way, they got to know industry leaders, like Art Anderson (former general manager at **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.**), the late Arda Berryhill (owner of **Berryhill Nursery**), Cindy Lou Pease (owner of **Evans Farms**), and Cindy Jeffers (works at **Landsystems Nursery**).

“It’s helped us be known in the industry,” Kathy said. “People come to us because we’re OAN members and have been involved in the association.” ©