From left: Jeff and Brent Smith are cousins continuing their grandfather's family business.
PHOTO BY JON CHRISTOPHER MEYERS / COURTESY OF TRECO

OR PART 1

GROWER PROFILE

TRECO® OREGON ROOTSTOCK AND TREE CO. INC.

OWNERS
Jeff and Brent Smith

KNOWN FOR:
Being a propagator of premium, disease resistant rootstock for nurseries and orchardists.

PEOPLE
Jerry Walden, accountant; **Eva Perfecto,** office assistant and hr; **Elena Burnum,** production manager; **Josh Bradley,** shop foreman; **Jose Luis,** irrigation and harvesting; and **Gerado Garibay,** greenhouse production and equipment operator.

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LISTINGS:
34 NurseryGuide.com
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TRECO — Oregon Rootstock and Tree Co. Inc.

Founded: 1941 by Bernard Smith

THERE ARE 80 YEARS and three generations of innovation backing every piece of rootstock grown and shipped by **Oregon Rootstock and Tree Co. Inc.**, a company better known by its brand name, **TRECO®.**

Founded by Bernard Smith and now run by two of his grandsons, cousins Jeff and Brent Smith, TRECO ships apple and pear tree rootstock, mostly to grafting nurseries that produce trees for orchardists in the United States and internationally.

"The Willamette Valley offers the perfect climate for producing well-rooted liners year after year," Brent Smith said. "There are a few rootstock nurseries in Washington, but the majority of fruit rootstock comes from the Willamette Valley in Oregon."

Orchardists rely on different rootstocks that are available to give their producing trees the qualities needed and desired, based on ever-changing production styles, disease considerations, consumer demands and even local climate and soil conditions. The largest share of their product goes to the leading apple-producing state of Washington, but they also ship to New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, California and elsewhere.

"The rootstock helps control the size of the tree production, and helps it through different soil types, different climates," Brent said. "What might be a good rootstock for Washington wouldn't necessarily be a good root stock for California. Same as West Coast, East Coast."

Their key apple rootstock products include Geneva, EMLA, Poland Series, Budagovski Series and M-9 clones. The rootstock is grown using a layer bed process, where a mother tree is planted in a mounded bed and grown for a year. The following spring, it is twined to the ground, where it generates shoots that reach the ground and develop roots.

After this has time to grow, the shoot is cut off and becomes rootstock.

"That is our product that we sell year to year," Brent said. "The main layer, or the main mother plant that was planted originally, will stay in the ground for as long as we leave it in there."

The rootstock must be shipped to the grafting nurseries when the material is dormant; otherwise, the graft will fail. That makes for a busy time starting in late November.

"The plant materials typically start going dormant toward the end of

PHOTO BY JON CHRISTOPHER MEYERS / COURTESY OF TRECO

November, so we can typically start harvesting right around Thanksgiving," Brent said. "As soon as we're harvesting, we're grading and we're packing, and we're trying to prepare the early stuff for shipping."

There are additional shipping windows for some rootstocks that go dormant later in the winter, into early spring, but the main harvest is the busiest time. The nursery employs 45 people year round, but it swells to as many as 135 during that peak season.

The nursery also grows filbert trees for hazelnut orchards. These are their sole "full tree" product. The filberts are propagated using the same layering process as the fruit trees grown for rootstock, but are shipped as one-year whips. The company also has a portion of its property devoted to ryegrass seed production and hazelnut production.

In the beginning

The company now known as TRECO has gone through three generations of family ownership, but it all began with Bernard Smith.

Bernard was born in 1913 to Sylvester and Christine Smith, who were farmers. They were moving from Minnesota to Oregon when Bernard made his entrance in the small community of Idahome, Idaho, which is about halfway between Salt Lake City and Boise. He was the third of 13 children — eight boys and five girls.

Upon arrival in Oregon, the family homesteaded near St. Paul, a farming community on the French Prairie of the Willamette Valley. Bernard dropped out of school in the eighth grade to help on the farm. He met Gertrude Kahut, and they married in 1935.

They started their own farm, where Bernard grew row crops, such as corn, beans, mint, rhubarb and potatoes. Bernard started working with Oregon State University (then known as Oregon State Agricultural College) to develop new varieties of strawberries, including Hood strawberries and Marshall strawberries.

He founded a small apple orchard near Woodburn, Oregon, in 1941, on 150 acres. This would later become TRECO, but in the beginning it was called Knolview Nursery.

On this nursery, Bernard began stool bed propagation of new clonal rootstocks for apple trees. Replacing plain old seedlings with clonal rootstock provided a way to grow dwarf and semi dwarf apple trees for fruit production.

The innovation sparked considerable interest and demand, prompting the nursery to grow the dwarf and semi-dwarf apple trees on contract.

Bernard and Gertrude had 11 children. Four of their children would become involved in the nursery and ultimately become its second generation of leadership. They were Dave (father of Brent), Fred (father of Jeff), Mike and Dan. They ran Knolview after Bernard retired in 1963.

Growing up on the nursery

In 1975, the Smith family made a big investment in the future of their rootstock business. They purchased the rootstock operations of Chick-A-Dee Nursery in Tualatin, Oregon. This brought them additional genetics and know-how, allowing them to expand their line of rootstocks considerably.

"The stuff we had before was a non-certified rootstock, and they dealt in certified," Jeff said.

The family kept growing trees under the Knolview Nursery name, but created a new entity, Oregon Rootstock Inc., to grow and sell the rootstock.

It was during this time that Brent and

Jeff grew up and worked on the nursery.

"As 6-year-olds, we used to go pick berries with the neighbors down around the corner, and then for another friend of the family, we picked cherries and currants," Jeff said. "And then when I turned 9, I graduated to work at the nursery. And it was basically just field work, budding and hoeing and de-budding and tying, and eventually working up to where we did irrigation and drove small tractors and things like that, once we got older."

The nursery work brought the cousins spending money they needed to socialize. Growing up on the farm wasn't like the city. They needed cars to get somewhere and spend time with friends. That money wasn't just going to be given to them.

"It was nice to have a job that earned money and to be able to buy your first car yourself," Brent said. "Lots of kids didn't have that opportunity."

If there was any time off from school, they were working. Summer vacation, Christmas break, spring break — " If you had a week off, a day off or whatever, you were helping," he said.

After graduating high school, Brent earned a two-year associate's degree in horticulture from Clackamas Community College in Oregon City, Oregon, and Jeff studied business at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon, while both continued working on the nursery.

They came of age as the business underwent another transformation. It no longer made sense to run two separate companies. In 1989, they merged Knolview and Oregon Rootstock, thereby creating Oregon Rootstock and Tree Co. Inc., doing business as TRECO.

"It just became easier for us to merge it together and be one company," Jeff said.

Change at a breakneck pace

Bernard Smith died in 1991, 50 years after founding the family nursery, leaving a legacy that continues to develop.

The 1990s turned out to be a turning point for apple production. The Alar apple scare changed the market for the top staple among fruits.

Alar is one of several names for daminozide, a plant growth regulator. It was sprayed on fruit to regulate growth, make harvest easier and keep the apples from falling off the tree before they ripened. This kept the apples red and firm for storage and, ultimately, for market.

But with reports on "60 Minutes" and elsewhere that Alar posed a long-term cancer risk for those who consumed »

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treated fruit over time, producers stopped using it on their apples. Demand cratered for the Red Delicious apple, which was until then the leading variety. Consumers demanded replacement varieties not reliant on Alar.

"It forced the industry to produce something better for marketing and be more appealing to customers," Brent said. "Now there are almost too many different varieties in the supermarket, from Gala to Fuji to Cosmic® Crisp, an apple that almost eats better after being in storage for a year. There is hardly ever a Red Delicious on display anymore."

It was around this time that Brent and Jeff ascended into leadership of the family business. Three of the four Smith brothers (Dave, Fred and Mike) making up the nursery's second generation of leadership retired from the business in the mid-1990s. The youngest of the four, Dan, stuck around before retiring in 2014.

Around the year 2000, TRECO discontinued growing of trees to focus on growing rootstock. The ornamental and fruit trees they grew for decades went by the wayside. Filbert trees are the only full trees they grow now.

As Brent and Jeff have observed, today's apple orchard industry bears little resemblance to the past. Big, bountiful apple trees are no longer the norm.

"Back in the day, you had full-size trees where you had to use ladders to harvest the fruit," Brent said. "It took five, six years for them to come into production."

Now, the industry needs dwarf and semi-dwarf trees that produce in just a few years. That's because the marketability of an apple variety might only be 10-12 years.

"All your trees are crammed — they're planted 18 inches apart, six to eight feet in rows," Brent said. "And on what they call fruiting wall or a V-trellis, all the picking and everything's pretty much done from the ground."

With trellis growing, a support system helps the trees withstand the wind and fruit load, so they can direct energy into fruit production. Trellis growing also means that varieties can be replaced quickly if they become passé. Brent compared it to an "orchard on a hinge."

"They have to be able to do that to stay within the market," he said.

Brent and Jeff expect to see greater mechanization of harvest in the not-too-distant future.

"Orchards are trying to get to where they're picking mechanically now, with robots and color picking with cameras," Brent said. "Instead of having this tree with multiple branches hanging out all over, they have a real skinny tree with short, what they call spur branches, or fruit spur branches. And they may have two to three apples on that little spur, but when you look down this row, it looks like a wall of fruit, and robots and cameras can go through and pick."

This affects what TRECO grows, and in what quantities.

"It's driven by the customer, and we've got to grow what they want to put in their orchards," Brent said. "There's a lot of guys that watch the science. There's breeders that are really good salesmen, that can convert a whole group of orchardists to swing into a different rootstock overnight. We have to be prepared for that kind of stuff."

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