



Larry and Angela Bailey
enjoy living the farm
lifestyle with daughters
Katie, 13, and Abbigayle, 9.
PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

Embracing a legacy

Angela Bailey and her family come back home to the farm

By Curt Kipp

Angela Bailey never expected to own and operate a wholesale nursery. She believed that her life would lead her to other places.

Her mother, Verna Jean Hale, never expected to work in agriculture either. She had grown up on a farm and took steps to make sure she didn't end up becoming a farmer herself.

But despite her initial resistance, Verna Jean ended up working at a farm — a nursery, to be exact. In 1967, she founded Verna Jean Nursery, and then operated it until her unexpected death in 2005. Her passing left Angela, her only daughter, and Angela's husband, Larry, as the new owners.

"We had a decision to make," Angela said. "It was a beautiful piece of property with a business on it that was very viable. I grew up in the industry, so I had some idea of how to run a nursery, but not the day-to-day operations."

Making the decision tougher, Larry

had a successful career going as a chemical engineer for Intel, the semiconductor giant, in Hillsboro, which is a suburb west of Portland. His job, and their home, was located far from Verna Jean Nursery, which is on the east side of Portland in the Cascade foothills.

Complicating matters, Angela was expecting their second child. She knew she'd be unable to give her full effort to learning a nursery.

"We had to decide whether to embrace the legacy or let it go," Angela said.

They embraced it.

"We decided it was too valuable to let it slip away," she said. "To give credit, Larry is the one who said we should move across town, that he should give up his career and leave Intel, and that we should run the nursery."

Generations of farming

Today, Verna Jean Nursery remains a successful grower of shade, flowering and ornamental trees. Most are field

grown and medium size, but the grower also offers containerized trees, as well as liners and custom grafting.

Japanese maples are a specialty. Angela estimates that Verna Jean Nursery has some 40 upright and weeping *Acer palmatum* selections available.

The nursery also offers beech, dogwood and the owners' favorite — monkey puzzle trees. Propagating these spiny Chilean giants is tricky and can only be done from seed. It took the Baileys several attempts to perfect their process.

"That's something we anticipate always having," Angela said. "We enjoy them. They have a uniqueness about them that's fun."

Their two daughters — Katie, 13, and Abbigayle, 9 — enjoy living on the farm and helping with the family business. They move irrigation pipe, help with inventory, gather seeds and perform other tasks. "They're troopers, I have to say," Angela said.

If the daughters end up farming ▶



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this piece of land, they would become the fifth generation of the family to do it. It all started back in the 1920s, when Angela's great-grandparents first farmed the land by growing berries. Her grandparents continued the practice into the next generation, but her mother — Verna Jean Hale — didn't want to.

"She was not going to farm, because she did that growing up," Angela said.

Verna Jean married a teacher because she felt that marrying a farmer would naturally lead to farming. Her plan worked, initially. One Christmas, however, a member of the Belcher family who owned Powell Valley Nursery asked Verna Jean to help out for a few weeks. It was supposed to be a temporary situation.

"She ended up working there for 19 years," Angela said. "She really fell in love with the trees, the people and the industry."

While still working at Powell Valley, Verna Jean ended up starting her own nursery at home. It began with one acre and expanded gradually to 17 acres.

"She just loved trees and she loved people," Angela said.

The nursery focused on shade, flowering and ornamental trees. Most of the material was field grown, and much of it was grown to specimen size.

"One thing that had an impact on me is how she took care of her customers," Angela said. "She was a very social person and it was as much about walking around and talking to people as it was selling."

The next generation

Angela wasn't opposed to farming, but her parents felt it was very important that she pursue a college education. While she was attending George Fox University, she met Larry and they married.

First, the young couple moved to Seattle, where Angela completed her degree in communications at Seattle Pacific University. From there, they relocated to Palo Alto, California, so Larry could complete his graduate studies in chemical engineering at Stanford University. After Larry earned his doc-

Verna Jean Nursery

Known for: Ornamental, shade and flowering trees; liners; custom propagation

Founded: 1967

Owners: Larry and Angela Bailey

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torate, he went to work for Intel and the family moved to Hillsboro.

At this point, Angela believed her husband's career would determine the family's path. They had a 3-year-old daughter and another on the way.

"When my mom passed away, I was so shell-shocked by all of it," Angela said. "I didn't know which way was up for a long time."

For the first four years they operated the farm, Larry took on the main responsibility while Angela focused on the two girls. "I think in a lot of ways, he's the hero of our story," she said.

Other growers provided critical advice and assistance. "We had tons of offers of help because my mother was so well liked and so well known around here," Angela said.

This contrasted with Larry's experience in the tech world, where competitors didn't help each other. "We were to some degree overwhelmed with the generosity of spirit," he said.

With all this help, and a healthy dose of their own determination, the Baileys figured things out.

"Being an engineer, Larry really brought a lot of practical skills in regard to analytical processes and logic," Angela said. "We make a good team. I tend to think more creatively."

After the first three years, Larry went back to full-time work outside the farm, working as a patent agent at a law firm. Most of his patents deal with technology, energy, aerospace, semi-

conductors and exploration, but he has written one plant patent.

Meanwhile, Angela took over the day-to-day responsibilities at the nursery.

"I had to learn how to load trucks on my own without Larry around," Angela said. "I had quite a learning curve at the beginning."

Changing and adapting

The Baileys have learned to adapt to market conditions. Whereas Verna Jean probably shipped about 80 percent of her trees to the East Coast, the Baileys have shifted strategy. Today, their sales are fifty-fifty — half to the East Coast, half to local markets.

Their customer base is diverse. Independent retailers are their biggest market, but they also sell to landscapers and rewholesalers. The emphasis varies from year to year, depending on the market conditions.

Larry and Angela have found that landscapers and garden centers are looking for different tree traits. Garden centers seek out trees that are conventionally saleable, but landscapers are more interested in trees that have quirks in shape or branching habit. The shape of a specific tree might make it suitable for a particular location, such as next to a building or a water feature.

In addition to the specimen trees, the Baileys have started to introduce medium-sized trees, and they will also grow liners and do custom grafting. "We're hoping to start selling more liners," Larry said. "It seems like not many people are doing it."

In spite of all the changes, the Baileys have made sure to keep Verna Jean's most important focus — customer care.

"We don't have a sales minimum here," Angela said. "We love to walk the field with our customers and let them pick out the trees. We want people to know what they're getting, and to get trees they are happy with."

Becoming an industry leader

Since taking over the nursery, Angela hasn't limited herself to

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running it. She's also become quite involved as an industry volunteer.

She served two years as president of the OAN Mt. Hood Chapter and also serves on the OAN Government Relations Committee. On the advice of fellow grower Barry Bushue, she also joined the Oregon Farm Bureau, where Bushue serves as president.

Before long, she was calling Bushue back to ask if she could get even more involved. She eventually became second vice president of the Oregon Farm Bureau, and has served in the role since December.

"The average person is at least three generations removed from the farm," Angela said. "Most consumers don't understand what it takes to be a farmer, to be a nursery person, to be in agriculture, yet they rely heavily on the products agriculture is providing to them. Helping people understand the impact of agriculture on their day-to-day life, whether they're on the farm or off the farm, is a passion of mine."

In her role, Angela has taken part in the Farm Bureau's annual lobbying visit to Washington, D.C. for the last seven years. She is also active in state issues.

"One of the most impactful places we can make a difference is with the people who make our laws," Angela said. "We need to have a collective voice and we need to have a loud voice, or things are just going to get worse in Oregon."

Verna Jean believed in agriculture education. She often hosted student field trips, and loved helping the kids see how farms operate. Today, Angela is helping educate the public. It's one more way she has followed in her mother's footsteps, while putting her own twist on it. And she wouldn't have it any other way.

"I find it interesting, endearing, intriguing — there's so many words — that my life has come full circle," she said. ☺

Curt Kipp is the director of publications and communications at the Oregon Association of Nurseries and the editor of Digger magazine. Contact him at ckipp@oan.org.

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