



# Kuenzi Turf and Nursery

Founded: 1990 by Myron Kuenzi

IT'S BEEN A LIFETIME of learning and growth for nursery and turf grower Myron Kuenzi, owner of **Kuenzi Turf & Nursery** in Salem, Oregon.

Over the past 28 years, he has grown a 35-acre turf farm into a 500-acre farm and nursery. He's done it by studying the busi-

ness, walking the fields, talking to people, and never assuming he had the best solution to a problem.

"You can't learn without humility and asking a question," he said. "Too many people are afraid to be wrong or look dumb by asking questions. The proud person won't ask

a question. They got it all handled."

Over the years, he has gained extensive knowledge of growing techniques and business management. Sharing that knowledge with employees is a top priority, but it is always a two-way discussion, done in an atmosphere of coaching, affirmation and respect. "It's an environment of learning," he said. "If employees are condescended to, they're not going to contribute anything to you."

Myron also shares information with customers and encourages his employees to do the same. "My intent and mission is to serve people in the industry, to be a problem solver and a solution finder," he said.

## Diverse offerings

By design, Kuenzi Turf & Nursery is highly diversified, growing a variety of crops for different kinds of customers, who are located in a variety of regions.

Wholesale nurseries in the northern tier of states and Canada purchase Kuenzi's bare root and in-ground bag liners. Landscapers and brokers buy their specimen shade trees. Their Japanese maples go to landscape yards and garden centers. And their sod is delivered to local customers in Oregon.

Kuenzi Turf & Nursery is best known for careful treatment of trees both above and below the soil. Great emphasis is placed on trimming the branches carefully. "We are working for growers that are doing the best job, so we spend more time pruning trees to get better tree heads to reduce our custom- ➤



- **ABOUT:**  
Turf and tree nursery offering specimen shade and flowering trees, liners and Japanese maples.
- **PRINCIPAL:**  
**Myron Kuenzi**
- **KEY EMPLOYEES:**  
General manager **Tyler Kuenzi**, facilities/maintenance and sod production manager, **Josh Kuenzi**, tree field manager **Luis Tellez**, customer service **Rick Metzger**, accounting **Sara Kuenzi**, tree sales and inventory **James O'Brien**, secretary **Amanda Hernandez**
- **EMPLOYEES:**  
40 year-round, plus seasonal employees and contract employees during the harvest
- **CONTACT:**  
📍 6475 State St.  
Salem, OR 97317  
📞 503-585-8337  
✉ tyler@kuenziturfnursery.com
- **ONLINE:**  
**www.kuenziturfnursery.com**
- **TRADE SHOWS:**  
**MANTS, iLandscape, Farwest**
- **LISTINGS:**







## Kuenzi Turf and Nursery

Myron Kuenzi (center), owner and founder, encourages a collaborative spirit of learning at Kuenzi Turf & Nursery. Pictured with him are (from left) Luis Tellez, Jim O'Brien, Tyler Kuenzi, Josh Kuenzi, Rick Metzger, Sara Kuenzi and Amanda Hernandez.

In addition to the shade trees and liners, Kuenzi grows Japanese maples and arborvitae. The maples are available in 12 different cultivars, shipping as 4-foot trees up to 8-foot specimens.

### Growing from the grass roots

How did Myron grow a business of this size and scope? One step at a time.

He grew up the third oldest child of 15 children in a farming family. His parents were grass seed farmers in the Silverton, Oregon area.

He went to college at Oregon State University, earning a bachelor's degree in business, with an emphasis in accounting. While at college, he met his future wife, Diane Gulstrom. They married in 1974 and had six children: Sara, Tamara, Ruth, Zach, Melanie and Josh.

After graduation, Myron passed the exam to become a Certified Public Accountant, working for more than six years in that field. This experience provided him with a business background, particularly a keen awareness of money in and money out — traits that would serve him well later. "In operating a small business, you need to be very well rounded," he said.

Myron next took a job with a sod farming business with locations in Oregon, Washington and California. He became their point man on finances, turning around company locations that had run into trouble. "That gave me more training in turf and just running a small business," he said.

In 1990, Myron became self-employed, founding Kuenzi Turf on 35 acres in the Willamette Valley, east of Salem, Oregon. The business sold turfgrass to residential and landscape customers from Eugene, Oregon to Vancouver, Washington. At the time, that area took in a population of around 200,000 people, proving a fertile ground for growing his business.

After a few years in business, Myron began looking for expansion opportunities, but he wanted to find the right fit for what he was already doing.

"We were serving landscape contractors," he said. "We had this labor, we had this equipment and we had this customer base

ers' work," Myron said.

Prunings are timed so as to encourage budding or branching, depending on need. "When the customer gets it, they're going to see good growth in the way they want it," general manager Tyler Kuenzi said. "It's a lot of work the way we prune it, but we believe it gives customers a better tree."

Kuenzi prunes the tops late in the growing season, forcing the lateral buds to set due to the different growth hormones in the tree. When spring comes, and these buds push, the tree ends up filled out with a good lateral branch structure.

The nursery also invests time making sure all trees ship with a healthy, fibrous root system. All of the company's finished shade trees are grown and shipped in 21-inch in-ground grow bags, which are made of a durable fabric. These trees can be harvested and shipped at any time of the year.

Approximately 50 percent of nursery's liner trees are also raised in in-ground grow bags, but these are smaller, 10-inch bags. "It's a lot more work to do it, but it allows us to have plants with a much higher percentage of survivability," Tyler said.

"Our customers tell us they have very few plant losses," Myron said.

The specimen shade trees in the 21-inch grow bags contain native soil rather than a growing mix, and the bags stay on the tree after it is removed from the ground to be shipped. According to Myron, this preserves 85 percent of the root system of the tree, compared to 25 percent with spade dug or B&B, and greatly reduces transplant stress. It also preserves a food source the tree can tap into once it arrives at its destination and is transplanted.

"We really value stored carbohydrates," Myron said. "We want plants to go to sleep in the fall with their carbs stored in the roots. In the spring, they take off, because they've got food storage. The first 30-45 days of

growth is all from stored energy."

In the fall, carbohydrates are pulled from the leaves and stored in the stem and roots of the tree. Harvesting too soon or cutting off too many roots during harvest does not allow the tree to have enough stored energy for the coming year.

During the fall liner planting process, nursery workers take extra care to minimize transplanting stress. As an extra precaution, the nursery uses slit pots, which air prune the roots while the trees are growing in the greenhouse, so that root pruning is not necessary. The reduced stress helps the leaves stay on the seedlings for 4-6 weeks before they go dormant. This to ensure adequate carbohydrate storage and better growth in the coming spring.

In the case of a landscaper buying a specimen tree, the result is greater survivability. For wholesale nurseries growing the in-ground fabric bag liners into finished product, it means quicker turns.

The bags trap roots so that when the trees are transplanted, the roots are ready to grow immediately due to the stored carbs and calloused ends. Root-pruned bare root trees, by contrast, must callous. As a result, it takes those trees 45 days to shoot new roots.

The bagged trees can be ready for market two years sooner, Myron said. That in turn reduces touches and frees up field space for the next batch of trees that much sooner. The result is more efficient use of labor, land, machinery and production inputs.

"For those who understand it, it's a business model," Myron said. "For those guys, we can't grow enough of this stuff. During a tree shortage era, it's huge."

Kuenzi grows one third to one half of its trees and liners from seed. The others are grown from seedlings, which are provided by fellow Oregon growers Heritage Seedlings and Liners, and JLPN Inc., both located close by in the Salem, Oregon area.





Luis Tellez, tree field manager, strives to create the best possible root health and branching habit in each tree that Kuenzi Turf & Nursery grows.

and administrative setup. What could we add on without having to add equipment?"

The answer was shade trees. They could even be sold to the same customers, who were already familiar with the company's quality. It just made sense.

In 1995 Kuenzi Turf became Kuenzi Turf & Nursery. They began growing and selling several kinds of specimen shade trees, shipping them when they reached 1¼ to 3 caliper inches. From the beginning, the nursery used in-ground grow bag production.

"I'm a self-taught guy in the tree business," Myron said. "I didn't mentor under anybody else. It's all down to knowing what you don't know — reading, interviewing, asking questions."

A key early hire was Luis Tellez, who came on as a budder and in time became the nursery's tree field production manager. Together Luis and Myron honed their production techniques, learning every step of the way. Luis has become indispensable to the nursery operation.

"He knows that the plants are talking and what they are saying," Myron said.

In the early 2000s, Myron saw an opportunity to diversify the nursery's customer base as well as its product line. He augmented his shade tree production with the introduction of liners. Before long, the nursery began shipping to destinations outside Oregon, including the upper Midwest, the northeast, and Ontario, Canada.

"I'm very glad we diversified," he said.

During Myron's travels, he had noticed certain species of trees, such as oak and *Nyssa* having problems in production. The liners

didn't grow well after being transplanted to new field growing operations. Root control bags had worked so well in his shade tree operation, so in 2005, he decided to use 10-inch in-ground fabric bags for the liners.

The in-ground bag liner provides better transplant success and improved the trees' first-year growth. The nursery has expanded into more than 15 genera and 30 cultivars.

"That became a niche for us and we expanded it into more of the difficult-to-transplant cultivars," he said. "We're seeing in the northern tier of states they appreciate what we're doing because they have a shorter growing climate."

It was smart business to specialize in trees that are popular but difficult to grow, and therefore short on the market.

### A transition to the next generation

As Myron begins to transition into retirement, family members and other key personnel look to continue the legacy of the business while adapting to a changing future. In so doing, they'll keep in tune with the spirit of innovation that their founder established.

"Part of our role as the next generation would be to fine tune it," Tyler said. "We're not here to change it. We've got to be taking it from where it was established and improving it. It's not good enough to stay with the status quo."

Family members involved in the business include Myron's son, sod production and facilities manager Josh; son-in-law, customer service Rick Metzger; daughter, bookkeeper Sara; and his nephew, general manager Tyler Kuenzi.

Josh grew up around the nursery. When he was younger, he spent many hours helping his dad out with different tasks. When he transitioned to working in the business full time in 2013, he came with a background in construction and retail. This has allowed him to direct his team in building the infrastructure for the growth in the nursery. Since then he has also learned and assumed the roles of facility and maintenance manager and sod production manager.

Sara has been a long-term support to Myron over the years. She started working for her dad during the early years of his start-up, doing secretarial work in the summers and after school. Before long, she started doing the bookkeeping full time for the business, and still does today.

After marrying Myron's daughter, Rick started at the nursery part time. He worked in the greenhouses and supported oak seedling propagation, which has become one of the key niches for the company. He became a full-time nursery employee in 2014, doing customer service and supporting production and sales.

Tyler joined the business in early 2018. He previously worked as a plant manager at a cabinet shop. "Someone told me I went from the dead side of the tree to the live side," he said.

He brings a background in engineering and management, and plans to apply it to the business. He has spent the past year learning as much as he can from the company's experienced cadre of growers. "I'm drawn by the challenge nursery presents," he said.

The biggest challenge, of course, is to turn a profit, by raising a quality product.

"For the most part, our product keeps selling itself," Tyler said. "It's a testament to Myron's effort to grow a good quality product." ©

