



THE ADVOCACY ISSUE

Part 1: **THE NEED**

With a season on the brink, OAN responds

STORIES BY CURT KIPP

THE SEASON WAS on the line, and everyone knew it. Normally, the word “season” might refer to collegiate or professional athletics. But for nurseries this past March, it meant something else.

Spring shipping.

With the proliferation of the COVID-19 pathogen, states were restricting businesses and their ability to operate. Numerous mandates and shutdowns were imposed in a matter of days. All this as growers were sending first shipments, and retailers were greeting the spring rush.

“I was sweating bullets waiting for our governor to release the mandates,” said Mark Bigej, an owner of Al’s Garden & Home (Woodburn, Oregon), which operates four retail garden centers and three nursery growing operations in the Portland area. “I was on the phone hearing how all the other garden centers in California and Michigan were having to shut down.”

A full shutdown in Oregon would have been disastrous for nurseries. The state sells close to \$1 billion in nursery stock annually, with most of it shipping in the spring.

“We easily could have had the economic carnage that is happening with our hotels and restaurants,” said Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries (OAN). “That easily could have been us.”

Responding to a crisis

As the possibility of a nursery shutdown swirled, the OAN scrambled its jets — professional staff, legal counsel, member leaders and contract lobbyists — to prevent an industry-crippling closure. Everything was on the line.

It’s not usually *everything* that’s on the line, but it’s always something, as Rod Park is well aware.

The second-generation nursery owner, who grows specimen trees at Park’s Nursery (Gresham, Oregon), has been involved in OAN advocacy efforts for close to 35 years. He first got involved in 1986, when a quarantine issue was affecting his business. One of the association leaders asked him to chair a committee to address the matter.

And that’s how it began.

Park went on to serve in a variety of roles, ultimately becoming OAN president in 1991. Following that, he ran for political office in 1998 and served 12 years on the Metro Council, which

makes land-use planning decisions for the Portland metropolitan region. Thus, Park has had a front row seat as both private business owner and as a government official.

That’s why he sees a need for nurseries to always be represented in government decision-making.

“It’s going to go on, whether we’re there at the table or not,” Park said. “And it has to go on because you need labor, you need transportation, you need regulation. You need government. It’s part of the system. Without the government, you’d have people pulling all sorts of shenanigans.”

Kathy LeCompte, who owns seedling grower Brooks Tree Farm (Salem, Oregon) with her husband, Dave, served as OAN president in 2001. She later went on to run for the Oregon Legislature on two occasions, narrowly losing her bid for election both times. She, too, sees the value in speaking out.

“I just think it’s completely unfair of us as growers to expect that everyone will understand our business,” she said. “Those people who are elected might know a lot about taxes or schools or education or some other aspect of our day-to-day life, but they might not understand the impact of a vote on my business if I’m too lazy to explain to them what that might be.”

A full-court press

The OAN Government Relations Team exists to serve as a coordinated advocate for nurseries, greenhouse operators, landscapers, and associated suppliers and service providers whenever needed. Similar to basketball players running full defense across the entire basketball court, the OAN has pressure points throughout the capitol building.

“The power of one accumulated voice for the entire industry, up and down the supply chain, is far more convincing to a decision maker than just a single person speaking out,” OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone said. “The ability to make a policy suggestion, or speak in opposition, or advocate for something more helpful to the industry, carries more weight when you have many voices instead of just one.”

With the shipping season on the line due to COVID-19, the OAN made use of its many available voices.

Jim Simnitt (Simnitt Nursery) had his business to run in the middle of shipping season, but he knew that without a full-court political press, there would be no season to worry about. ➤



As the current president of the OAN Board of Directors, it fell to Simnitt to serve as the voice of the growers. He made personal appeals to government officials, imbuing the OAN's message with an authenticity that can only come from walking the nursery, interacting with his

workers and touching the dirt every day.

Those involved feel that Simnitt's efforts were key.

"I sent emails to different members of the governor's staff," he said. "I sent an email to Nik Blosser, the governor's chief of staff. There was no reason for him to get back to me, but he did get back to me, to say 'We're listening to you and we hear your concerns.' I was impressed. I thought, 'They really do hear us.'"

Soon, the word came down that the governor would be ordering certain business sectors to shut down indefinitely because the risk of spreading disease was too great under the circumstances. Nurseries, however, weren't among them. They could keep shipping.

The season was saved.

When the word came down to Bigej, who served as OAN president in 2017,

he was greatly relieved. "We were able to show how the industry could operate, and we convinced them to allow us to remain open," he said. "That was no accident. And had we done nothing, I have no doubt we would have been shut down, which would have been catastrophic for our industry."

Right team, right time

Saving the season came down to having a team in place ready to act on the industry's behalf. The right players had to be in place, with the right strategy to get results and a total commitment to securing the best outcome possible.

"When the situation is that unsettled, you can either stop and watch the paint dry or you can do something about it," Stone said. "Stopping and watching the paint dry is not what we do." ☺

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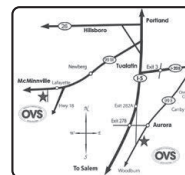
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