



Karl Neering, Melody Knock, Bruce Ernst, Kim Stone and Philip McCarthy of Ernst Nursery.

GROWER PROFILE



PRODUCTION:

Field-grown 75%

Container-grown 25%

KNOWN FOR:

Field-grown conifers, shade trees and shrubs, including arborvitae, boxwoods, maples, rhododendrons and others

PEOPLE

Bruce Ernst, owner; Kim Stone, controller; Karl Neering, nursery manager.

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LISTINGS:

125 NurseryGuide.com

ERNST NURSERY & FARMS LLC

Founded: 1978

THERE'S AN OLD slogan many businesses have used over the years: "Big enough to serve; small enough to care."

Bruce Ernst started his nursery at the smallest possible size. As a high school junior still taking FFA classes, he put up a single greenhouse on his parents' property, where he propagated rhododendrons, azaleas and arborvitae. His mother took orders on the phone while he was out working in the fields.

When he came into the house for lunch, she would transfer calls to him and he would say, "Hello, shipping."

But small though the nursery was, Bruce had big dreams.

Since then, **Ernst Nursery & Farms LLC** has grown by leaps and bounds over the past 42 years, with production now encompassing 1,420 acres. It offers a large portfolio of woody ornamentals, including conifers, maples, boxwoods, rhododendrons and other trees and shrubs.

But the slogan "big enough to serve; small enough to care" still fits.

According to Nursery Manager Karl Neering, customers receive personalized service from a nursery that grows key products in bulk, while offering a diverse lineup of

plants to fill out orders.

"I think Bruce's expansion of product selection, and the size Ernst is now, allows us to sell to a larger variety of customers," he said.

The nursery grows the majority of its products in the field. Ernst focuses on propagating most of its products on site.

Emerald Green arborvitae is a big commodity. Consequently, it is Ernst's top selling product. However, the nursery maintains a diverse product line, updating its production plan each year in response to customer demands and observed interests. Listening to customers is important.

"I'll have a whole season of customers coming through and touring," Karl said. "If I drive by something and no one says a word about it, I'll take note."

Customers from throughout the United States, and into Canada seek out Oregon-grown material, which Ernst exists to supply.

"In the Willamette Valley, especially the northern end of the valley, we can grow for every region of the country, faster and more beautiful than they can grow it for their own region," Karl said. "People in different regions of the country are educated on what the plant looks like grown from Oregon, and that's what they want." ➤

Ernst Nursery & Farms



Starting smallest

Bruce was raised on his family's farm in the Willamette Valley farming community of St. Paul, Oregon, population 421.

The town is most famous for its annual Fourth of July rodeo, but is also home to the St. Paul Roman Catholic Church, which is the oldest brick building in the Pacific Northwest, dating to 1846.

Bruce's grandfather, Henry Ernst, founded Ernst Hardware, a local hardware store that is still operating in St. Paul, under different ownership, as **Ernst Irrigation**.

His parents, Elmer and Maryanne,

owned a small farm and grew hazelnuts. As a farm kid, Bruce became well acquainted with hard work from an early age.

"Growing up, we picked berries for the neighbors," he said. "I remember Jack Connor was our neighbor, and we picked strawberries for him. He paid us \$1.50 per hour."

Throughout high school, Bruce worked for his uncle Jim Ernst of Valley Harvester Service, operating the equipment that picked the beans and corn. Valley Harvester was hired by many different farmers throughout the region.

Through observation of these farmers, "I saw how everybody did things," he said. "It was a good experience for me."

He dreamed of a future in agriculture, but wondered how he could make it a reality.

"I wanted to farm," Bruce said, "but our farm was small. I asked, 'What can you make a living on, on a few acres?'"

A friend, Tom Wolff, gave him the idea of starting a nursery. Bruce's ag teachers at St. Paul High School, Mike Eslinger and Matt Herb, also encouraged it.

Bruce went with it. As a high school junior, he started his nursery on a small



patch of land in front of the family home. There, he put up a greenhouse and started some rhododendrons, azaleas and arborvitae inside. Eventually he planted them out in the field.

While running his small nursery, Bruce attended horticulture classes at Mt. Hood Community College and learned more about the nursery trade. Upon graduation, he took a job working for Art, Richard and Angelo Spada at A & R Spada Farms LLC. He worked there three years while still keeping his own nursery going.

“Angelo gave us some of our first big customers,” Bruce said. “He sent some people to me when they were out of product. I’m thankful for his confidence in me. Those customers I still have.”

When he needed more acreage, he turned to his uncle, Gene Smith, who grew hops just down the road. Bruce cleared a three-acre cherry orchard for his uncle and, in exchange, got to use it rent free for five years.

He then rented an additional piece of land from Gene. Next, Bruce rented land from neighboring farmer Al Smith and eventually purchased that land.

“People would call Bruce when they had a piece of land available,” Karl said.

From there, Bruce increased production and sales, and bootstrapped his way up to a larger and larger footprint.

A key move was acquiring Home Depot as a customer in 1993. They were then in an expansion mode. “They wanted a truck on the road every day until they told us different,” Bruce said. “It went on a month and a half.” He supplied them for 10 years.

Survival and diversification

When the Great Recession hit in 2008, the nursery lowered prices but kept production moving. “We moved everything through those hard times,” Bruce said.

The nursery has modernized its technology somewhat to keep up with changes. When pagers were popular, Bruce had one. Then he got a pickup-mounted, brick-sized car phone when those became available. “I could never hear the phone ring over >>



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the tractor, so I set it up to honk the horn on the pickup,” he said. “I couldn’t hear that, so then it flashed lights.”

These days, video calls are a staple of doing business.

“Somebody’s got 10 feet left on a truck and you Facetime them,” Bruce said. “You walk around and they say, ‘Yeah, throw some of those boxwoods on there.’”

Ernst Nursery & Farms isn’t limited to nursery offerings. The business also grows hazelnuts and some wheat. These help diversify and stabilize revenue. Currently Bruce is developing a washing and drying facility for hazelnuts. This is located at the main farm on Gearin Road and is scheduled to open in 2021.

“Diversification (is important), so you’re never caught where you’re just long on one thing and can’t move it,” Karl said. “You can always rely on another product line to keep the sales moving. No one has the crystal ball, so the more diverse you are, the better off you’re going to be.”

The nursery relies on a number of key personnel to keep running in addition to Ernst and Neering, including Controller Kim Stone, Sales and Logistics Manager Phil McCarthy and Customer Care Specialist Melody Knock.

There’s also Senior Mechanic Mike Sechser, responsible for keeping equipment running throughout the operation. “We have a lot of equipment, and he’s just one guy,” Bruce said. “I don’t know how he does it.”

Bruce’s son Alex, 23, is starting to get involved in the business as well.

Through it all, Bruce continues to enjoy what he does, and doesn’t see quit-

ting anytime soon.

“It’s not really a job,” he said. “There’s days when it’s a job, but most days it’s a pleasure. I look forward to coming in to work. Not too many people can say that, can they?”

With the quality the nursery can deliver, the team running it sees no need

for elaborate marketing campaigns or branding. The nursery is solid, dependable and unpretentious — like its owner. ©

Curt Kipp is the director of publications and communications at the Oregon Association of Nurseries, and the editor of Digger magazine.

