



From left, Jerry Simnitt and Jim Simnitt run the family business started by their father.

PHOTO BY CURT KIPP



GROWER PROFILE



OWNERS:
Jerry and Jim Simnitt, owners.

PEOPLE:
Roberta Simnitt, bookkeeper.

KNOWN FOR:
A variety of woody shrubs, including more than 200 varieties of rhododendrons and a variety of quality *Daphne*, *Pieris*, *Kalmia*, *Leucothoe*, *Prunus* and other shrubs, all propagated and raised on-site until ready for market.

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Simnitt Nursery

Founded: 1978 by Jerry Sr. and Janice Simnitt

SIMNITT NURSERY IS A family-owned nursery that sells field-grown and containerized woody shrubs — think rhododendrons, daphne, *Pieris*, laurels and more — to retailers, landscapers and rewholesalers.

The nursery was founded by Jerry Sr. and Janice Simnitt in 1978, and today is owned by their two sons Jerry and Jim Simnitt. Their main calling card is rhododendrons and daphne.

“We grow a lot of different varieties of rhododendrons, like over 200 varieties, which is quite a bit for rhododendron growers,” Jerry said. “It’s a lot.”

And they go beyond the typical.

“Our customers are looking for something unusual,” Jim said. “We can offer an unusual rhododendron. People think of rhododendrons and it’s that old-fashioned kind. There’s so many out there that are different and new and unusual and cool. We can offer that.”

The nursery is also known for its strong collection of *Daphne* offerings.

“We grow a lot of *Daphne*, which is a great plant for these smaller yards because some of them bloom all summer, and they’re low maintenance,” Jim said. “It’s just somewhat drought-resistant, which is great in this kind of environment.”

Rock daphne (*D. cneorum*), Eternal Fragrance (*D. × transatlantica* ‘BLAFRA’ PP18361) and Summer Ice (*D. × t.* ‘Summer Ice’) are three of the notable selections they grow.

Almost everything is propagated on-site by the Simnitts, so they have full quality control from the beginning until the plants are market-ready.

Although the brothers are 14 years apart in age — a running joke among Oregon growers has people “mistaking” older brother Jerry for Jim’s father — their partnership flows naturally, and they share many responsibilities. “We don’t have titles,” Jim said. “We do everything. We’re just partners and own it. And it works.”

In terms of production, Jerry focuses on containers. Jim concentrates his efforts on field production. On the business side, Jim works on inventory and sales, while Jerry focuses on propagation and plant quality. Jerry’s wife, Roberta, serves as bookkeeper. They have a work crew of eight supporting them, several of whom have been there for the long term.

The two brothers have a shared belief in hard work, and their goal is to provide a quality product that they, themselves, would be eager to buy. Gathering cus- ➤



customer feedback is critical in that. They make a point of talking to customers, asking them whether the product meets their needs — what's working well and what needs improvement.

"Anytime we do deliveries, a lot of times it'll be Jerry or myself," Jim said. "And then when you're unloading it there, you can see, what does it look like coming off the truck?"

School's out

The nursery began in 1978. Jerry's father — Jerry Simnitt Sr. — was working as a vice principal at Boise-Elliott Elementary School in Portland. The family lived in the Parkrose area on the east side of Portland. The area was of a rural character, with mailboxes on posts, but it was urbanizing rapidly in the 1970s, with construction of the East Portland freeway (Interstate 205) not too far away.

When some of his relatives moved down into the Willamette Valley, Jerry Sr. picked up his brood — wife Janice, son Jerry Jr., daughter Joanie and baby Jim — and followed suit.

They purchased a home and some land north of the Willamette Valley community of Canby, on a bluff not far from the Willamette River floodplain. Now they had 2.5 acres and needed something to do with it.

So they did what many Oregonians with farm acreage decided to do. They started a nursery.

It really wasn't a left-field choice. Jerry's grandfather, Kenneth Simnitt, had worked at nurseries in the Parkrose area. Jerry Sr. had some skills he'd picked up from his dad, so he made use of them.

"During the evenings and summers and weekends, [my dad] would propagate rhododendrons and plant them and grow nursery stock," Jerry said.

At the same time, a friend of the family was retiring from the nursery business and provided Jerry Sr. with a key contact to buy many of the first plants they produced.

Jerry Sr. enjoyed his new line of work so much that in 1980, he made Simnitt Nursery his full-time venture. Jerry's mother, Janice, assisted. They built the business together.

"It helped a lot that she was free labor and so were my sister and I, and then Jim eventually, too," Jerry said.

Not that young Jerry, who was 14 at the time, objected to his duties.

"I loved it," he said. "It was a great, great childhood. I was able to learn to do something and plant it or propagate it and see it on all the way through, till the end where you could sell it. You nurtured it and it grew."

Jim was also in the field at a very young age. Born in 1978 when the nursery started, he was soon being carried on his mother's back as she propagated plants in the greenhouse or planted them in the field.

"It was just what we did as a family," Jim said.

A typical summer day started around 7:30 in the morning. "We did a lot of weeding, and we potted," Jerry said.

As Jerry came of age, he took on a larger role in the business, and soon, he and his father were running it together. "They were partners in all this," Jim said.

In the beginning, most of the material grown was sold to wholesalers in the Seattle area. As sales grew, the nursery gradually expanded its acreage. It moved from 2 acres to 5 to 9, and expanded from there. Today the nursery grows on three non-contiguous sites totaling 65 acres. Two are near Canby, and one is in the Aurora area.

A time of transition

In 2005, Jerry Sr. retired from the business and Jim stepped in as Jerry's new partner. By then, Jim had a horticulture degree from Oregon State University; a season of work with acclaimed garden retailer Molbak's in Woodinville, Washington; and six years of experience as a grower at Simnitt under his belt.

The two brothers then worked together to chart the nursery's path forward.

"We started just slowly adding more plants, adding more products," Jerry said. "[We] looked at what worked at some other places, saw what products are selling or different things that would be a good niche for us also."

Over the past 15 years since the brothers have become partners, they have



made retailers a more prominent part of their customer base. They sell to some local landscapers as well. Geographically, the customer base is diverse. About 85% of the customers are outside Oregon.

“You can’t be everything to everybody, but we can be some things to everybody,” Jim said. “Some people want big stuff, some people want container material, so we’re trying to balance that so we can do it all, and have a diverse customer base, and have a diverse customer location too.”

They keep in mind that trends change, and the long-term health of their business is important.

“The market might be doing one thing right now, but we can’t change with the market over a year,” Jim said. “With our crops, we’re 2, 4, 6 years out and you’ve got to look at that [long-term] trend, not just what’s happening today.”

Both brothers have taken on industry leadership roles. Jerry joined the Oregon Association of Nurseries Executive

Committee, serving as president in 2012. He did it to support the industry and to be involved in the issues affecting them.

“We’re lucky to be in Oregon, and we’re lucky to be in Oregon because of our association,” Jerry said. “It has looked out for us and taken care of us in a lot of ways and kept us safe to keep growing and to grow plants. We’re lucky that the growers before us set up the association, and it’s been as good as it’s been, and protected us.”



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Simnitt Nursery

Jim witnessed his brother's experiences as an OAN leader firsthand and saw the value, so he followed suit, serving as president during the tumultuous year of 2020.

"It's a lot of work, but it's rewarding," Jerry said.

They see many issues ahead for the industry, as well as for their business. Labor and water availability are key.

One of the issues for their nursery, specifically, is urbanization. Although Canby is a farm town detached from Portland proper, it is not far away and has absorbed significant regional growth. Although the main Simnitt Nursery property was once somewhat isolated from Canby proper, new neighborhoods keep popping up closer and closer.

"It makes growing more difficult because we have to bring our semis through residential areas to load," Jerry said. "We're more careful on spraying, we're more careful on discing than we used to be, and noise — moving equipment is a hassle."

Sometimes people move to be near scenic farmland but don't anticipate the things that go along with that. "I don't want any issues, so we try hard," Jerry said. "Most people are very, very nice about it."

The importance of family

In the end, the Simnits have enjoyed the nursery lifestyle, as it has allowed them to pursue what they truly value. There are few things they would change.

"Our family is pretty important," Jim said. "We're pretty close. Our sister's not part of the business, but she lives right here. And so, we see everybody, and our parents live right here. We see them all the time."

Jerry and his wife, Roberta, enjoyed being able to raise his five daughters on the farm.

"My kids grew up here," he said. "Every day when they got home from school, I was able to see them. I usually had lunch with them in the summer when they weren't in school. Those are things I really liked. I saw [Roberta] every day. She worked at the nursery also, but was also taking care of the kids. I was very



lucky. Those things were important to me. I didn't realize how important until now."

One of Jerry and Roberta's daughters, Amanda, became a grower herself. Amanda and her husband, Wayne Staehely, own **Columbia Nursery LLC**, which is also located in the Canby area. Amanda has followed her father Jerry and her uncle Jim into OAN board service and is currently on the Executive Committee.

"She's really smart," Jerry said. "She can do anything she wants, and she's proven it."

With Amanda, that makes four generations of the Simnitt family involved in

nurseries: Kenneth Simnitt, the nursery worker; Jerry Simnitt Sr., the nursery founder; Jerry and Jim, the nursery owners; and now Amanda.

And for Jerry Sr., it's a legacy he can take pride in.

"I think he is very pleased with setting the nursery up and both of us here doing it, taking over for him," Jerry said. "Our families are all here. I think he just worked hard to make sure that we had the nursery started and let it grow. I don't think he had any long-term plans for what it would look like, but I think he's very pleased with what happened." ©