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NURSERIES™

MEMBER SINCE 2012



It takes the whole family to keep Country Garden humming along. From left: Aaron, Emily, Melissa and Joe McLaughlin. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

MEMBER PROFILE

FOUNDED: 1991

OWNERS: Melissa and Joe McLaughlin

KNOWN FOR
Custom-designed and planted hanging baskets tailored to specific locations

PEOPLE: 6 full-time and 6 seasonal employees

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Country Garden Nursery LLC

BY VIC PANICHKUL

IMAGINE THAT your custom hanging baskets are so successful and have such a loyal following that when a customer in Tiburon, California, passes away, they've set up a trust so that your hanging baskets keep getting shipped to their town.

That's the kind of loyal customer that has made Melissa and Joe McLaughlin's **Country Garden Nursery** in McMinnville, Oregon, so successful — and that tale is not an uncommon one.

"Our first customer is still a customer today," said Melissa. "They were a pivotal growth point in our business."

"The woman who was the mayor of Corte Madera, California, grew up in Gaston, Oregon, and drove through here on the way and saw the baskets and fell in love with them," said Joe.

"She went back to California and created a beautification committee, and we ended up making 50 baskets for them," Melissa said.

"In Toledo, Oregon, there's probably more baskets per capita than anywhere. The mayor started a program and raised all the funds to buy our baskets," Melissa said. "She died unexpectedly, but her daughter has picked up where she left off."

Over the years since it started in >>

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1991, Country Garden has honed a sharp focus on creating custom hanging baskets and selling them directly to consumers. There's no middleman involved.

The recipe for their success is simple. First, gather creative input from the client to create custom baskets that suit their needs. Next, create a feedback loop that collects input from them regularly on what they liked and what worked for them. And then finally, incorporate that feedback into future orders.

"Our customers are primarily made up of downtown associations that develop 'Main Street' projects, shopping centers, restaurants, office parks, and some homeowners," said Aaron McLaughlin, Melissa and Joe's son.

"A whole shopping center may want 40 or more baskets. They tell us the size, colors, shapes that they're looking for and we create the hanging baskets for them," Melissa said.

"A shopping center in Beverly Hills has been buying from us for 28 years. They're under water restrictions so we use self-watering pots. The top half is filled with potting soil and bottom filled with water and it wicks into the pot," Aaron said. "A lot of people have switched to this in California because they've been in drought and under water restrictions for so long. It cuts down on labor cost from having to water frequently as well as water."

"Having relationships with our customers is what makes us successful," Melissa said. "We can check in with them and see how things are for them, especially if it's a new customer. A shopping center manager will check with the landscaper or maintenance team to find out what was successful and what they liked, and we incorporate that feedback for their next order. People really like that. We will tweak their baskets from year to year based on that feedback."

"They may say 'I love that red plant but not the yellow plant.' We have a record of what we planted for them, and we know what went into their baskets," Aaron said. "But it's always helpful if they send us a picture," especially if more than one plant of that color is used in the basket.



All of the hanging baskets are designed and planted to order for each client. PHOTO COURTESY COUNTRY GARDEN

"Often, we want to have a little variation even if they ask for the same color scheme, it's not going to be cookie cutter from year to year," Melissa said.

New customers receive special attention to set them up for success, ensure they're happy with the product, and turn them into repeat clients.

"When we get new customers, we try to educate them and have them come up with a management plan that works before we plant something for them. They need to budget for the cost of watering and main-

tenance," Melissa said. "We do everything we can to help them be realistic out of the box," so the customer is successful and happy with the results.

"It's an expensive product, but it's a premium product. They get the bang for the buck," she said. And what they're doing develops repeat business.

"The majority of our customers are long term. They've been with us 10 years or more," Aaron said. "The hanging baskets become part of the property's culture and look. Frequently someone will be



Melissa McLaughlin removes some spent flowers from a hanging basket in a greenhouse. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

at a shopping center and see the baskets and ask the property manager where they came from, and they'll send them to us. That's how we get most of our new customers, by referral."

The nursery produces about 4,000 baskets during the spring and 1,000 during the fall — each one custom-created and planted to order.

A road-side start

Melissa and Joe started the nursery in 1991. "We started with 3,000 impatiens and petunias in 4-inch pots in one greenhouse by the house. They were 50 cents each and we sold them by the side of the road, and it would sell out in a couple of weeks," Joe said.

"In 1992 we added a second greenhouse and kept adding one every year or so," Joe said. Now they're up to 11. "We have just over half an acre under greenhouse," Aaron said.

"In 1998 we bought our first box truck and added a second one later because we started shipping more to California.

It was a 26-foot box truck, and we can put more products in there than a semi," Aaron said. "In semis, we can only put baskets on the floor, so it's not an efficient way to ship. Most of our customers are not equipped with docks and forklifts to handle a truckload of racks."

"We built our own racking system, and our drivers deliver the baskets and help them unload the plants. They also close the loop with the customer on any information they need to be successful with the plants," Melissa said.

"We want our delivery to be the best for our customers because it's the one time we see them every year," Aaron said.

Changing directions

In 2009, Country Garden finally quit the retail operation to focus on hanging baskets.

"We had been doing baskets since 1993. It was easy to recapture that customer for the next year, but we didn't have enough basket customers to live on, so we needed to also sell retail bedding

plants," Melissa said. "As the number of basket customers grew, we were able to drop retail."

"When we started, grocery stores and hardware stores didn't sell bedding plants. But 15 years later, they began to, and it added to the competition," Joe said. "We didn't really want to create a destination retail nursery."

Focusing on creating custom baskets lets the nursery play to its strengths and word began spreading.

"Growth has been by word of mouth. When people see our product in their area and it's what they want, they track us down," Melissa said.

"Sometimes it takes 2–3 connections before they get our information," Aaron said. A prospective client might start with a mall worker, who then refers them to a mall manager, who then might have to check with the landscaper.

"When Gavin Newsom was mayor of San Francisco, he wanted the city to be greener and he wanted hanging

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Country Garden**

baskets like they had in Marin [County]. He has people so he told them to ‘go find where to get them,’ and we got a call,” Melissa said.

As the operation has grown, it’s come to involve the whole McLaughlin family.

Aaron worked at the nursery since he was a kid. “I was 3 years old and filling pots and trays,” he said. “When I was growing up, I thought the last thing I wanted to do was work in the family business. But when I went to Oregon State University, I fell in love with horticulture and got a degree in horticulture and business.”

He went to work for **Bailey Nurseries, Inc.** after graduating, but eventually returned to the family nursery.

“In 2016, Aaron came to work for us,” Joe said. “The day he came in we were talking about building a new greenhouse. I said, ‘That’s Aaron’s job now.’ I just got out of the way,” he said. “What I



Aaron McLaughlin says the nursery uses wire baskets so that flowers can be planted down the sides as well as top. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

found important was to get out of the way and let the next generation take the reins. I’m his support if he needs it. He’s been fabulous. He’s helped the nursery a lot.”

Aaron focuses on operations and has been able to build efficiencies and improve product quality at the nursery. “I wasn’t gifted with the artistic genes,” he said.



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Challenges ahead

Looking ahead there are challenges for the nursery. “It’s time for me to take action on a succession plan,” Melissa said.

“We all wear a lot of hats around here and that’s great but there’s room for a new person. We have a really solid core group of people and an established company culture. We need a new person to bring a new perspective and ideas to help us grow,” she said.

“Our biggest challenge we have is acquiring new customers. We’ve spent little on advertising in the last two years. When we’ve advertised in the past and new customers call, they’ve never seen any of the ads,” Aaron said.

“We’ve had steady growth and we’ve tried to push on that but taking care of our existing customers is our best plan for growth. People find us more efficiently than we can find them,” she said. ©

Vic Panichkul is Publications Manager at the Oregon Association of Nurseries and managing editor and art director for Digger Magazine. Contact him at 503-582-2009 or VPanichkul@OAN.org