



Aiming for equilibrium

Oregon nurseries say a good work-life balance is critical to their success

Work-life balance typically just refers to time spent at home versus time spent at work. In reality, it is about much more than that. ADOBE STOCK

BY MITCH LIES

IN AN INDUSTRY RELIANT ON LABOR, maintaining a healthy workforce is critical. And for many nurseries, ensuring the health of a workforce means much more than ensuring employees get home safe at night.

It also means doing what they can to create a healthy work-life balance.

Nursery workloads are cyclical, and overtime is often a fact of life. With these givens, achieving good work-life balance can be difficult, but it is critical to the success of their operations and the health of their employees. That's why it is something they work at continually.

At **Robinson Nursery** (Amity, Oregon), a grower of bare-root, shade, flowering and ornamental trees and shrubs, that can mean offering a generous vacation package that includes four weeks of paid vacation annually after ten years of employment.

At **Fall Creek Farm and Nursery** (Lowell, Oregon), a blueberry breeding company and nursery serving commercial fruit growers and nurseries, in Lowell,

Oregon, that can mean cross training workers and moving them around when necessary, so an employee isn't overwhelmed with work when returning from time off.

At **F&B Farms and Nursery** (Woodburn, Oregon), a grower of finished annuals, certified organic herbs and vegetables, perennials and potted indoor plants and hanging baskets, that can mean allowing flexibility in how a worker uses his or her paid time off.

In all, Oregon nurseries employ multiple techniques to encourage a good work-life balance among their work force.

It's (not just) about time


Work-life balance typically just refers to time spent at home versus time spent at work. In reality, it is about much more than that, said Josh LaPoint, sales manager at **Rio Verde Plantas** (Cornelius, Oregon), which specializes in premium shrubs and uprights.

"It's more about the quality of your time at home and the quality of your time at work," LaPoint said. To that end, Rio Verde emphasizes that employees should

tune out work when they get home.

"I tell my team that 'We don't work from home,'" LaPoint said. "I don't call my team when they are at home, I rarely text my team. If I need to get something done first thing Monday, I'll send an email, and I encourage them to 'Please don't check your emails or respond to me on the weekend or in the evening. I don't need your immediate response. You aren't being graded on that.'"

"We tell our team that when you're at home, you've got to be at home mentally," LaPoint said. "You've got to put down your phone, be with your kids, go on a date with your wife. Do the stuff that you should be doing at home, because when you come to work, you'll be happier."

Efforts to improve work-life balance at Rio Verde also extend to the workplace. In recent years, the company started giving employees more ownership over responsibilities, which has enabled them to be more organized and flexible, LaPoint said. The change has helped workers make their time more effective and more fulfilling, while improving their ability to make accommodations for appointments, 

Aiming for equilibrium



Shay Boga (right) perennial shipping lead at Peoria Gardens and owner Ben Verhoeven discuss the importance of taking time off and balancing work and life. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

vacations and other activities.

“Putting our accountability chart in place and encouraging ownership at every level of our company, making team members responsible for their own tasks, has been super crucial to our productivity, and our workers enjoy it,” he said.

Cross training

One key to a creating a good work-life balance in the workplace, nursery executive said, involves cross training and moving employees around to facilitate continued productivity to cover staff taking time off. The nursery benefits because productivity is maintained during worker vacations and it helps the mindset of workers who know that their tasks will get done while they are away.

“We feel really strongly about this, and it starts at the top, where we do cross training among the management and the supervisory team,” said Dave Daniel, who manages the U.S. and Canada business for Fall Creek. “The idea is that people know they have a backup when they go to take some days off or go on vacation. That way, they are much less stressed. They know that when they come back, they aren’t

going to pay a price. And we do that all the way down through the system.”

Daniel acknowledged that there is a cost to the policy. “It is an added expense that you have to budget,” he said. “But we feel it is worth it.”

Chris Robinson, co-owner of Robinson Nursery, said he too cross trains employees to ensure flexibility in employee scheduling and continued productivity when workers take time off.

“We have a really deep bench, so that if any single person has to go, someone else can step in,” he said. “It doesn’t matter what time of the year it is or what we’re doing or what position they are in, if your kids have things at school that you need to go to, or if they have sporting events that you want to attend, or just for any reason, we like to let our team members take time off when they need to. We think that is really important, regardless of how much vacation time a person may or may not have left.”

Generous vacation packages are common in an industry, where pressures can mount during shipping seasons and workers need time off to recharge. And, according to Robinson, it is also important to

encourage workers, both through communication and through example, to take time off when they have it coming.

“The big key is the leadership team at the company needs to use their time off,” Robinson said. “You can have all the policies in the world, but if your culture says, ‘Well, we just don’t use our time off. We always work,’ then that is what is going to happen. So, it’s really important that the leaders of the company model the behavior that you would like to see.”

Ben Verhoeven, owner of **Peoria Gardens** (Albany, Oregon), a bedding plant nursery producing annuals, perennials, vegetable starts and hanging baskets, also offers a generous vacation package, along with flexible work schedules, health and dental insurance and a pension.

He echoed Robinson’s comments that when workers take time off, everyone benefits.

“When they come back, they are recharged, productivity improves, worker morale is up and the culture benefits from it,” Verhoeven said.

Extracurricular, social events

Hosting annual picnics and other extracurricular activities is another



OFTEN
IMITATED

NEVER
DUPLICATED

POWERED BY
POLYON[®]
Controlled-Release Fertilizer

POLYON[®] Controlled-Release Fertilizer. Feeding YOUR Success.

POLYON[®] is a radically different fertilizer concept – one that can deliver radically better growing results for you. The key to the consistent, predictable release of POLYON[®] fertilizer is all in the exclusive, durable polymer membrane that coats each granule (our proprietary reactive-layer coating, or RLC). During the coating phase of the manufacturing process, a bond is formed with the substrate ensuring consistency and durability in every particle. Choose POLYON[®] and you will get guaranteed results backed by our POLYGRAPH[®] Guarantee.

For more information, visit www.polyon.com or contact your sales representative today!



Scott Renfro:
*Territory Manager,
Oregon/Washington*
srenfro@harrells.com
206-617-3950



Aiming for equilibrium

technique nurseries employ to promote a good work-life balance among employees.

At Rio Verde, for example, workers who have recently been promoted or who have passed leadership courses or achieved other accomplishments are honored once every three months in a company luncheon. “We just talk about our successes and what cool stuff has happened,” LaPoint said.

At Fall Creek, the company hosts an annual picnic after the busy fall shipping season each year that includes multiple activities. And families come and really enjoy it, Daniel said.

At F&B, head grower Michael Lamberson said he takes it a step further, letting workers organize parties. “You give them control of the Christmas party three weeks in advance, and they really enjoy that.”

Reaping the benefits

In one sense, incentives to improve the work-life balance of employees can be a smart business decision, in that a healthy workforce typically results in improved productivity and better worker retention.

“We’ve proven over the years that we have low turnover,” Fall Creek’s Daniel said. “And we are confident that our added investments in policies and programs that support work-life balance are playing a key role in employee retention.”

And speaking of retention, Peoria Gardens has had employees with 40 years of tenure, Verhoeven said. “A new employee might be somebody who’s been her for six or ten years,” he said.

But that isn’t necessarily the driving force behind executives’ decisions to encourage a healthy work-life balance, executives said. In most cases, they said, creating an environment that encourages a healthy work-life balance is simply the right thing to do.

“We recognize that family is more important than work,” Robinson said. “So, our philosophy is a family-first environment, and then we set everything else up to show that that’s what we believe first and foremost. It’s just the right thing to do.”



Jose Rios loads trees on a cart at Bountiful Farms. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

“The plants don’t grow themselves,” said Verhoeven. “It’s people who grow the plants. And you’ve got to support the people who support you.”

“The reality is, if I’m having a really crappy home life, it’s going to wash into work,” LaPoint said. “And if I’m having a really crappy time at work, it’s going to wash into my home life. Conversely, if they have a great day at home, they come to work happy. So, we try and be really conscientious of that when we’re working with our people. It can be a vicious cycle or a really uplifting cycle, and we try and make sure that it is an uplifting cycle.”

The industry’s uniqueness

In many respects, the nursery industry is unique from other industries, and, according to Todd Nelson, co-owner of **Bountiful Farms Nursery** (Woodburn, Oregon), grower of pot-in-pot and B&B grafted ornamentals, topiary plant material, sculptured art forms and unique plant material, a good operation can take advantage of that.

“When we’re aware that someone might be struggling with anxiety or other mental health issues and wants to be left alone and not around others, we give

them that opportunity to be outside and enjoy the clean fresh air and the sunshine or the rain,” Nelson said.

“I think there are a lot of health benefits that come from being in the natural light and not in an office complex where you’re kind of crammed inside,” he added. “And I think that can improve the work-life balance of a worker.”

In fact, according to Lamberson of F&B, the reason many people are in the profession is a love of plants and being outdoors.

“I think most people who get into this line of work do so for a reason,” Lamberson said. “It started out with some kind of passion for plants or passion for cultivation. They started out probably feeling like it was as much play as work. And I think probably a big part of finding work-life balance is not losing that. It is remembering that at one point this was your dance, this was your sport, this was your art. It is remembering that this isn’t just work, it is your joy.” ©

Mitch Lies is a freelance writer covering agricultural issues based in Salem Oregon. He can be reached at MitchLies@Comcast.net.