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MEMBER



It takes the whole family to keep Howell Prairie Nursery humming along. From left: Carolyn, Thomas and Michelle Staab. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

MEMBER PROFILE

FOUNDED: 1959

OWNERS: Carolyn Staab and
Thomas Staab

KNOWN FOR
Rhododendrons and azaleas

PEOPLE: 7 full-time employees



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Howell Prairie Nursery

BY VIC PANICHKUL

There's something to be said about sticking with what's proven and tried and true and building your success on that. That's been the winning formula at **Howell Prairie Nursery** in Silverton.

Howell Prairie Nursery was born out of a need to diversify and find another revenue source. Doug Staab's parents, Arlin and Evelyn Staab, were looking for a farm in the area and bought the former 10-acre cane berry farm near Silverton, Oregon in the mid-1950s. "They decided to grow nursery stock to supplement income, the

berries that came with the farm weren't enough," Carolyn Staab, Doug's wife, said.

They named the nursery after the road the farm is located on and started with blue spruce and rhododendrons. Doug was born in 1960 and grew up on the farm helping his parents.

A family business

"Doug and I dated in high school and his dream was to one day take over the nursery," Carolyn said. "Doug helped at the nursery during high school. He'd work after school and on weekends when he >>

Member Profile: Howell Prairie Nursery



Thomas Staab has a knack for figuring things out. Several years ago, they were losing plants in the propagation house and didn't know why. Thomas finally tracked it down to a key ingredient being changed in the soil mix that they were purchasing. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

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could. After we married in 1991, he continued much the same.”

After high school Doug worked for a landscape healthcare company for several years then he and a friend started their own business, while still helping at his parents’ nursery part-time. “Two years later his parents were ready to sell the nursery, he didn’t want to pass it up so we decided to buy it,” Carolyn said.

When their third child, Michael, was born, Carolyn quit her dental assistant job and took over the nursery. “It felt scary to be taking over the business while Doug was working to get the other one built up, plus raising three little kids, we had some pretty lean years,” Carolyn said.

Over the years, Doug had built up experience growing trees and shrubs. “He’d learned so much from his previous jobs,” Carolyn said. “Doug worked at ProGrass and started a tree and shrub healthcare program for them, so he had a lot of knowledge.”

Carolyn was no stranger to farming herself. She grew up in St. Louis, Oregon, which is a small community northwest of Gervais. Her parents had a 15-acre farm that was a pasture for cattle. “After us kids moved out, they rented the land to a

nephew who grew grass seed," she said.

When she started taking over the family nursery, Doug's mother was a mentor. "I worked with [Doug's] mom to learn the skills of trimming, transplanting, the bookwork, etc."

Two of their kids grew up helping in the nursery. When Thomas was in high school, he started helping at the nursery and when he graduated, he worked there full time. Their other son, Michael, also worked at the nursery.

Personal, business challenges

As the business grew, there have been both business and personal challenges that have come their way.

"About two months after we signed the papers as new owners, we had a big snow storm and two of our big greenhouses collapsed," Carolyn said. "We didn't lose the nursery stock thankfully!"

The nursery business cycle was also something they had to adjust to.

"Learning how to budget for the year was new to me, there were months where we had income and months where there was none, but lots of bills," Carolyn said.

Doug also wanted to change some long-standing practices at the nursery. "Doug's parents had done things their way a long time, but Doug had new ideas and that led to some big discussions!"

There was also the challenge of running the nursery when his parents both worked part-time for a few years after Carolyn and Doug took over. "Sometimes the burden fell on me to say ... no, we want to change that or do it differently. Family can be a challenge to work with and a blessing."

The family has had its share of heartbreak. Doug's dad passed in 2003 and in 2008 Doug was diagnosed with a serious

illness. Thomas began to help manage the nursery as Doug's health declined. Michael had just started to work at the nursery when he passed away in 2013 and Doug passed away in 2021, just 6 months after his mother passed.

For Thomas, working at the nursery was natural. "It's what I knew growing up. I worked on farms when I was younger. I mostly just wanted to be a mechanic and build things. When my brother passed away, I had to step up," he said.

"If something goes wrong, Thomas is good at figuring it out," Carolyn said. "A few years ago, azalea and rhododendron plants were dying in the propagation house, and we didn't know why. Thomas didn't let go. He kept at it until he figured out what the problem was." At that time they were buying their soil mix. And it turns out the company switched one of the ingredients and the cuttings didn't >>



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like it. They lost an entire crop, but were fortunate that a couple of local nurseries were able to sell them some stock.

“Thomas is also good at figuring out how to do things differently to be more efficient,” Carolyn said.

Expansion

In 2014, they started farming Carolyn’s parents’ property with field-grown material. This brought the total acreage of the nursery to 25 acres. In 2018, Thomas and his wife, Michelle, bought the property from his grandparents. Michelle also works in the nursery as the office manager.

In addition to expanding the acreage, the nursery has also expanded in other ways.

When they took over the nursery from Doug’s parents, there were only 12 greenhouses and now there are 27.

They’ve also added more plant varieties.

“We work with a lot of landscapers and wholesalers, and we realized that to keep in the market, we needed to diversify so when our customers asked for something, we looked into expanding our operations to try to supply it for them,” Carolyn said. “We discontinued items that weren’t selling well and expanded on what was selling well. Thomas continues to look at improvements in spraying, fertilizing and cost saving measures.”

What’s ahead

As they look to the future, Thomas hopes to add another propagation house so they can expand their capacity and look at bringing automation to the farm to help save labor and make operations more efficient. “It’s harder to get some varieties that we want so if we had another propagation house we could expand,” Thomas said.

“Quality and making our customers happy, that’s what matters to me. We don’t need to be bigger,” Carolyn said. “We’ve stayed steady. For us, we just want to stay steady,” Carolyn said. “We’re continuing the legacy of Doug’s parents, Doug and Michael as we work and grow the nursery.”

There’s also the hope that the grandkids will get involved in the nursery. “We’ll see if the grandkids will take it over someday,” Carolyn said, of her grandkids Henry, 6, and Erika, 9. “Henry’s already taking after his dad, trying to figure things out.”

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



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