

Inspiring optimism



Mike Darcy

Head “plant nerd,” longtime speaker, host of gardening shows on radio and TV, and author of the *In the Garden* email newsletter. You can reach Mike, or subscribe to his newsletter, at ITGMikeDarcy@Comcast.net.

When local cities began to have beautification programs using hanging baskets, Don created the necessary heavy basket holders needed to support the weight of a large basket filled with soil and then watered. PHOTO COURTESY GARDEN GALLERY IRONWORKS

“I’m going to plant some peanuts this year; it just sounded like fun. I’ve got the seed going, so we’ll see.” Those were the words from Don Sprague to me when I visited with him in mid-March.

If ever there was an optimist, it was Don Sprague.

The founder and owner of Don Sprague Sales and **Garden Gallery Ironworks** in Hubbard, Oregon, Don was well known throughout the Pacific Northwest. He was a strong supporter of the Oregon Association of Nurseries (OAN), and the events they created — especially the grower-oriented Farwest Show and the consumer-oriented Yard, Garden & Patio Show.

Don Sprague Sales was founded in 1981 and was initially a distribution company selling horse feeders, hay racks, and other farm-related items. The customer base was small mom-and-pop farm stores.

Through the years, as the market changed and mom-and-pop stores became fewer, the business evolved into iron products for home gardeners which were sold

In Memoriam

See Page 96 for an obituary of Don Sprague.

through independent retail garden centers. Don’s sister Carol was also working in the business, and she had a good eye for designing iron products that would appeal to home gardeners,

While the farm supply business continued, the market for selling iron trellises, arbors, screens, plant stands, etc., for the home gardener greatly increased. Probably their most well-known product, the Cinch Trap for moles and gophers, is sold nationally.

In 1999, a large outlet mall, Woodburn Premium Outlets, was built along Interstate 5 between Portland and Salem, not far from the Hubbard, Oregon, headquarters of Don Sprague Sales. The owner and manager of the mall at the time wanted to create a beautiful atmosphere with flowers and planters throughout. The outdoor mall became a great venue for showcasing some of Don’s iron work products.

The highlight? Don created a spectacular “Petunia Tree,” which was 15 feet

tall and held 300 individual pots of petunias. Even driving by on I-5, it was a focal point and hard to miss.

When local cities started beautification programs using hanging baskets, Don created the necessary heavy basket holders needed to support the weight of a large basket filled with soil and then watered. Lake Oswego, Oregon, was one of the first communities to create a hanging basket program and Don’s hangers were used and are still used today. Many other cities now use these hangers.

In 2018, Don was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. The ongoing treatments caused many changes in Don’s life. Through it all, Don remained an avid gardener of both flowers and vegetables. He included his grandchildren and they became involved in gardening with him. While they were learning about gardening, they were also infected with his love of gardening.

In mid-March, he wrote me the following note. It reflects the views of many in the gardening community and of how we pass on our devotion to the world of gardening.

“Life has taken a different turn for me. I went to the hospital the end of December to have some work done on my vocal cords and came out with a tracheostomy and a feeding tube, and no voice. I spent most of January in the hospital. Now I’m adjusting, I’ve been told these new changes will be my life and I’m going to make it work. I’m blessed with wonderful family and friends and I’m working with a couple grandkids to get the garden going. We are putting in more raised beds and a new watering system. I’ve got my garlic and onions planted — also peas. The potatoes will go in the ground on



What I'm Hearing

Good Friday (my dad's old rule). I'm looking forward to good weather next week and I'm excited to see summer."

Don's condition worsened and in late June, his feeding tube was removed, and he was placed on hospice care. I visited Don on June 21, and we visited with me talking and him writing questions and responses on a white board. It was obvious that he was devoted to his garden and he was very concerned that his raised vegetable beds were not fully planted.

Later I learned that the next day he had his daughter pick up 60 zinnia plants from **N&M Herb Nursery** (Hubbard, Oregon). On the following day he ordered two flats, (40 plants) of assorted vegetables. On Tuesday, June 25, he texted owner Rosie Sullivan at N&M that he was sending a grandchild to get three pepper plants because there was a space for three and he wanted his vegetable garden complete. When the three pepper plants were planted, his vegetable garden

was complete.

Don died two hours later.

Many members of the OAN have conveyed condolences and there are far more than can be included here. However, I would be remiss if I did not include at least a few examples.

Lori Vollmer, retired co-owner of the Portland garden store Garden Fever! said, "We first met Don when we joined the Northwest Nursery Buying Association. We visited his booth every year at our buying shows. It wasn't just his great products, which we purchased each season and our customers loved. It was also because Don was such a genuine person. He was always welcoming and remembered what nursery we owned. But this personable quality was not because he was just trying to impress us and sell us his wares. It was because he wholeheartedly enjoyed his fellow man and woman and appreciated their interest in the products his company was making and sell-

ing. He was never one to push products on buyers, always doing his best to answer any questions we had. It was a joy for us to see him and work with him every year at the show. He was the best of what makes the nursery industry a beautiful trade to be in. He will be greatly missed and to all the new product reps, because of Don, you have much to live up to. Rest in peace, Don."

Mark Bigej, an owner of **Al's Garden & Home** (Woodburn, Oregon) commented. "Don Sprague was one of the hardest working, most creative and sincere people you would ever want to meet. He was always coming up with new ideas and ways to revolutionize the decorative iron industry. There was no project he wouldn't tackle. I loved coming to him with an idea — I never heard, 'No, we can't do that.' I always heard, 'Let me think about that and we'll figure out a way to do it.' And the results were always astounding. More important than all of that, Don was always honest, straightforward and truly caring. His love for gardening was second to none. Just this spring I took a load of compost out to his house to fill his newly built raised beds. Despite his inability to speak (he used a dry erase board to write what he wanted to say), he was smiling and as upbeat as ever. He was full of life, and loving life. He had an amazingly positive attitude and was excited to plant his vegetable garden in his new raised beds. He truly counted each day as a blessing and didn't bemoan his situation. I will miss Don for many things, but mostly for the amazing, caring person he was. Rest in peace Don — your smile, passion and caring heart will live in my memory forever."

On Thursday, June 20, Rosie Sullivan called me and shared that she had visited Don and the feeding tube was removed and he was on hospice care. He had asked her to call me to say that he wanted to see me. The next day, I visited him, and he wanted to meet me in his garden. His daughter wheeled him out in a wheelchair. As I was leaving, he motioned for me to wait while he wrote on his white board. He held it up for me to read, he had written, "I'm glad our paths have crossed."

Don, I too, am glad our paths have crossed. ☺

Jiffy
GROWING SOLUTIONS

**Jiffy
Preforma**
for a healthy
plant growing.



Enhanced plant root growth and health

Operational efficiency and versatility to growers

Consistent quality and reliability by results



JIFFY
PREFORMA

New Preforma Factory
in West Coast coming soon!
Connect with us to learn more.

Developing sustainable plant
growing solutions together
www.jiffygroup.com