



Many roads, same destination

Nik (left) and Sergei Ovchinnikov jointly own The Nursery Outlet and SNO Landscape but Nik runs the landscaping side and Sergei runs the nursery side. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

Five owners share their experiences on what it takes to start a nursery businesses

BY VIC PANICHKUL

There's no one template for starting a retail or wholesale nursery. Each business is as unique the owners who start them, the locations they select, and their unique visions for their businesses.

Digger magazine visited with five nursery owners who started their own businesses. Although they took different roads to their dream of starting their nurseries, their journeys shared common threads of a strong passion for the business, resourcefulness and flexibility.

Nik and Sergei Ovchinnikov The Nursery Outlet and SNO Landscape Woodburn, Monitor, Canby

Nick and Sergei Ovchinnikov started thinking seriously about starting a nursery back in 2006. They had grown up helping their dad on his Christmas tree farm, which also grew some nursery stock. In 2008, they started collecting Northwest native plants and grew them and sold

them to wholesale brokers in Washington.

"That was the base of the nursery," Sergei said.

"Then we got asked to start installing trees that we were selling so we started a landscaping business and when that business started growing, we began growing plants for the landscape business too," Nik said.

The landscape business took off so it gave them the money to grow the nursery, both based in Woodburn.

"The first few years were about making connections. Everyone was helpful with advice. When we came up with a problem and didn't know how to address it, we would just ask someone and get their advice, everything from front office issues to growing issues," Sergei said.

"It was a lot of trial and error too, a lot of learning," he said.

"We only had enough money to do things a little at a time in stages." The retail nursery didn't really start until 2020. "What we did before was more like a weekend hobby," Sergei said.

Finding ways to surmount challenges

One of the biggest challenges facing the brothers was the cost of starting up.

"The expense was tough. We didn't take out loans," Nik said. "We really didn't know how to budget, and we didn't take into account the seasonality of the cash flow."

But having a landscaping business as well as the wholesale and retail nursery turned out to be a big plus. "During the summer months the landscaping business was busy so it helped finance the other side of the business," Nik said. "Now, we try to keep a cash reserve for the slow months."

"We also used labor from our landscaping business to help the nursery," Sergei said. "When the landscaping season slowed down the nursery work was getting busy and the crew would switch over to work on our farms."

Funding land purchase was also a challenge for the brothers. "Leasing land was the most important thing that we did," Sergei said. "We could not afford to buy property at first."

"The investment was a lot smaller so we could devote the resources to put plants in the ground," Nik said.

Generating sales

"Selling our product was one of the biggest obstacles in the beginning," Sergei said.

"We had to be persistent and



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focus on customer service so we could get repeat business and referrals,” Nik said.

“Don’t give up. Some sales will lead to another and another,” Sergei said.

“We were visiting clients in Washington and picked a list of other nurseries in the area to visit and take plants to show them,” Sergei said. One order from those other nurseries alone paid for their trip to Washington.

But the location of the retail nursery next to Interstate 5 turned out to be a business generator. “Our location is our biggest asset,” Sergei said. “Purchasing this particular piece of property was the best investment and business decision that we made.”

The brothers have five farms now, including the retail nursery in Woodburn. One farm is in Woodburn, one is in Monitor and two are in Canby. Nik runs the landscaping side and Sergei runs the nursery side, but they co-own the businesses.

With the benefit of hindsight, the brothers said doing some things differently in the beginning would have helped them.

“I wish we organized our inventory properly from the start before we had more plants than we could keep up with,” Nik said. “Where were they? What stage they were they in?”

“Setting up the retail store earlier and planning it earlier so it would operate more efficiently, would have helped,” Sergei said.

Starting two businesses might seem crazy, but it worked out for the brothers. “Our business grew twice as fast because we grew together. Both our businesses grew hand in hand,” Sergei said.

“Have faith in yourself. Don’t be afraid to take risks,” Sergei said.

“We spent a lot of money on mistakes but sometimes we took the risks and it paid off. We’re not afraid to fail. Don’t be afraid to fail,” Nik said.

Alfredo and Maria Fernandez

AF Nursery

Woodburn, Salem

Alfredo and Maria Fernandez started thinking of opening their own nursery in 2008. He had been working at **J&S Farms and Nursery** in St. Paul, Oregon



Alfredo (left) and Maria Fernandez worked their fulltime jobs at J&S Farms and Nursery for 8 years while they were also working their own nursery to get it going. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

since 1998, moving up through the ranks and becoming a manager. His wife also worked at the nursery.

The couple had decided to postpone having kids so they could save some money and start a business of their own, Maria said. After years of saving up, they bought the Woodburn farm in 2010, but they continued to both work at J&S.

“We did everything ourselves in the evenings and on our days off from our jobs,” Alfredo said. They worked their full-time jobs for eight years while they were starting their nursery. “We had to do it to be efficient on labor. Labor is a big expense,” Alfredo said. They didn’t hire their first employee until 2012.

AF Nursery began by growing hedges, particularly emerald green arborvitae and laurels. They expanded over the years to include Japanese maples and boxwoods. Now, the Woodburn nursery has 12 greenhouses and another location in Salem has 12 more. The nursery has grown in a short time to 150 acres of fields between four farms.

Lessons learned

To make it financially feasible, the couple grew the business in stages. “We started small and learned over the years and grew in small steps,” Alfredo said. “We learned to put money aside to cover slow season.”

The couple tried to be as efficient as possible. “We use automation as much as possible,” Maria said. “We started potting

by hand. Now we use machines.” Maria said they also installed automated sprinklers on timers to save labor and water.

The first few years, they grew their customer base by word of mouth. “Most customers early on were re-wholesalers,” Alfredo said. He and his wife already knew a log of people from their jobs at J&S so having those connections helped them when they were starting up. “I had been in the industry since 1998. When we started, it made it easier because I knew a lot of people,” Alfredo said.

“It’s better to get your experience working at another nursery before you start your own nursery. I think that is what really helped me,” he said. “It would make it really hard to learn while you’re getting the nursery started.”

“Being an exhibitor at Farwest helps,” Alfredo said. “Last year was our first year and we did really well so we’ll keep doing it.”

Alfredo and Maria say they use the opportunity to connect with new customers and potential customers and to strengthen connections with existing customers face-to-face.

Steven Ekstrom and Brandon Schmidt

Ekstrom & Schmidt Nursery

Troutdale

The seed for Ekstrom & Schmidt Nursery started with a 5-acre plot that Brandon Schmidt bought in 2010. Steve Ekstrom was still in college at the time



Brandon Schmidt (left) and Steven Ekstrom both worked evenings and weekends to get their nursery started, while still working their fulltime jobs. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

but they were both working at **Ekstrom Nursery**, where Steve's dad was part owner.

"We worked evenings and weekends to start our own nursery," Schmidt said.

They slowly bought plants and started planting. They had access to crews from Ekstrom's dad's nursery, who could help plant on their off time.

"It was fun to do our own side farm," Ekstrom said. Originally, his father and uncle, who co-owned Ekstrom Nursery, were going to part ways and split the business, but when it didn't look like his uncle and dad were going to split, they worked to start their own nursery.

"We were always going to have a nursery on the side ... to learn," Ekstrom said, "but when my dad and uncle weren't going to split, we started our own. It took a while to get it going."

"We could grow and borrow equipment from Ekstrom Nursery and sell through them initially. They got the plants they needed and we got the sales we needed at the beginning," Schmidt said.

"It allowed us to get started a lot easier and faster. All we had to do was keep track of the equipment and supplies we used and then paid them at the end of the year. It worked out really well," Schmidt said.

In 2014, they purchased their current property in Troutdale, which was an existing nursery. When Ekstrom's father finally split from his brother, he brought over 140 acres from his share of Ekstrom Nursery, along with a portion of the client list, which was a mixed blessing. The new

nursery could supply some of the clients, but they ended up with some customers with needs they couldn't supply, and there was a non-compete clause, Schmidt said.

Lessons learned

Borrowing crews from Ekstrom Nursery benefitted the pair in more ways than one.

"We relied on our crew's experience with things we didn't know," Ekstrom said. "We had the benefit of their experience."

"We also relied on a lot on our community," Schmidt said. "When we were short on plants we relied on them, and in return when they were short of something that we had, they turned to us."

In hindsight, "we jumped in too fast on some things," Ekstrom said. The nursery switched to fabric bags but discovered later that some things didn't do so well in them. "We could have been more deliberate on what we decided to grow," Schmidt said.

"We learned to focus on what we know and were good at," Schmidt said.

"We needed to find our place in the market," Ekstrom said. "It takes a while to see where you and your plants fit in with your customers."

The pair also realized that it was a capital-intensive business to start and it would take a while to recoup that investment. "Grandpa's [Carl Ekstrom, who started Ekstrom Nursery] saying was overnight success takes about 15 years," Ekstrom said.

At one point, the pair decided they would make the switch to containers. "Once we had a vision, we sat



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down and figured out what equipment we needed to handle the volume we wanted to produce and found most of it on Craigslist,” Ekstrom said. “We found potting machines, tractors, excavators and trailers,” Schmidt said.

Advice for others

The pair underscored the need to work efficiently in their advice to others.

“Figure out how to get plants out the door the fastest,” Ekstrom said. “For example, buy a bigger liner so you can grow it faster. You can buy a one-gallon liner and cut two years out of the growing time.”

The pair also recommended starting smaller and working your way up. “We started propagating our own plants, propagating what we could not buy,” Schmidt said.

They did a lot of footwork to get their name out. “We went to trade shows to get our names out there, Farwest and MANTS,” Ekstrom said. “We picked up new customers at trade shows.”

They also relied on relationships and word of mouth. A supplier they worked with in the Midwest came out and shadowed them and saw what they did and thought it could work well with one of their customers, so they introduced Schmidt and Ekstrom to them.

Wayne and Amanda Staehely Columbia Nursery Canby

Wayne Staehely’s fascination for plants dates back to elementary school, where he was friends with a few kids whose families owned nurseries. In high school he took a lot of plant classes and worked at a retail nursery on weekends.

By the time he got to college, he was already dreaming of starting a nursery. “In college I worked at a garden center and one of the owners offered me an opportunity to lease some land — 5 acres — in Wilsonville with one greenhouse and I jumped at the offer,” he said. “It was a lot of work.”

In 2007 he bought 50 acres in Canby and started Columbia Nursery and in 2013 he bought another 80 acres in Canby. Since then, the nursery has grown



Wayne Staehely says cash flow is a big struggle when starting a nursery and it's still something he struggles with. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

to three different farms.

“Sometimes you just have to go for it and make the leap, but you also have to be patient because you’re growing something that takes time.” Staehely had developed a passion for specimen trees, so he carved out a niche for Columbia Nursery and made that its hallmark.

No stranger to struggles

Cash flow was a big obstacle. “It’s something we’re still struggling with. Things break down and we grow in the elements and sometimes that gets you,” Wayne said.

“Growing specimen plants also means that the investment (the plants) are in the ground 10 years before they’re salable,” Wayne said.

“We’ve had to sell some things off early before we really intended to in order to have the cash flow,” Amanda said.

“Dad was an accountant, and I went to school for business, so we plan weekly and monthly. The plan was to work our fulltime jobs and make it manageable to get the nursery going,” Wayne said. “When you’re running the nursery, one person has to make the day-to-day decisions.”

In order for them to keep expanding and to make their nursery what they want it to be, Wayne has had to keep working his fulltime job in the tech industry. Amanda eventually sold her Pilates studio to run the nursery.

To save on labor, they plan around it. “When you can do it yourself, you do it. Nobody is going to love or care for your nursery as much as you do,” Wayne said.

“We’ve also relied on friends and family,” Amanda said. “We hold a barbecue when we’re going to plant and invite our friends and family to help us. They pull plants out of the containers and prepare them for planting and then we feed them. The next day the planting crew comes in and plants them.”

The challenge of marketing

In the early years, the couple took a multi-pronged strategy.

“In mornings I made cold calls,” Wayne said. “I tried to meet people face to face. We joined plant societies. When I first started, I would do weekend garden fairs and I called on other nurseries and tried to sell through them. If they ran out of something, I’d try to provide them with it. When they got a customer that was looking for something they didn’t have and I had it, they’d refer them to me.”

They also attended the Farwest Show. “We met other growers through Farwest and met potential customers, which is the No. 1 thing,” Amanda said. “You have to be there consistently for a few years. Sometimes potential customers want to see you for a few years before they order from you. We build on relationships over the years.”

Advice for others

“I have no regrets,” Wayne said, “but I wish I could have streamlined the product line and not try to grow everything.”

His main advice? Don’t go too big right away.

“Plan your crops and try to be con-

sistent,” Wayne said. “Plan for the kind of nursery you’re aiming for. If you plant something that takes 10 years to grow, you have to plan for the future return on the investment,” Wayne said.

“If you’re a propagator or sell plugs and liners, you can flip them fast and have a steady cash flow,” Amanda said.

Keep things organized so it’s easier to reuse and recycle. “Plastic is a huge expense, so organize pots according to size,” Amanda said.

“When you have to buy, purchase things that are going to have longevity,” Wayne said. “Leasing land to start can be an option that gives you liquidity. You don’t have to tie up all of that capital and you can instead use it to buy plants.

“But consider what kind of improvements or infrastructure you’re putting in on a leased property. Is it movable? Hoop houses and irrigation pipes, equipment can

be moved but what are you buying that’s going to have to be left behind?”

Melissa and Joe McLaughlin
Country Garden Nursery
McMinville

The idea of owning a nursery started with a dream of having a country farming lifestyle. “My husband and I were living in California and wanted to move up here and buy property and have a country farming lifestyle,” said Melissa McLaughlin. Joe way back then had talked about wanting to start a nursery.”

“In 1989 when we saw this property (in McMinville) it had a small greenhouse and we thought, ‘Look we can start your idea,’” she said. It was 50 acres.

“We started [Country Garden Nursery] with some plugs of petunias and impatiens and potted them and grew them into 4-inch pots and we put an advertisement in the

local sales flyer and we put up signs on the road and started selling. That was the starting seed of the business,” she said.

“We filled up the greenhouse as much as we could and sold out in three weeks. That was our market research. Over the next few weeks, we ordered more plugs and ordered seeds of less commercially available bedding plants like Love Lies Bleeding and Nigella,” she said.

A rocky start

“In the beginning, it was hard to budget and we had to manage cash flow. It was volatile for a number of years. Joe had to work off the farm for a while. I didn’t have a lot of business background so I was slower than most in that regard. Joe’s off-farm job kept things going while we figured things out,” Melissa said.

“In the spring we made a lot of money but in the summer not so



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much, and it was a long time until next spring,” Melissa said. They planted baskets and tried to grow pansies and other things that would bring income in the fall.

“When we started, we thought ‘We can work on our farm where we live and have this laid back lifestyle.’ If we knew the reality of how hard it would be hiring people and paying payroll taxes, knowing the financial aspects of running a business, I don’t know that we would have started. Our plan was kind of vague. We had an idea and did what it took to bear fruit. The first greenhouse we bought we put on our credit card.”

The importance of pivoting

Although the nursery had started out as a retail operation for bedding plants, their location meant that it was hard for customers to find them. They weren’t a destination nursery, so marketing was a challenge. But an opportunity provided a solution that would take the form of change to flower baskets.

“We started baskets in a small way,” Melissa said. “A guy was in the area selling baskets and he really wanted to focus on sales, so we inherited the start of the basket business from him. They were pre-ordered, and we were only planting what people asked for. We knew we could sell it and make a profit and there was very little waste.”

It took them 4–5 years, but they made the shift over and closed the retail nursery operation. They did it in stages.

Now the custom-designed plant-to-order baskets are what the nursery is



Melissa McLaughlin says it's important to be open to change. She pivoted Country Garden from a retail nursery to custom-designed plant-to-order hanging baskets nursery. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

known for and their clients include municipalities, retail and business developments and shopping centers.

Advice to others

Finding labor is hard so it’s important to keep good staff. “We put a lot into training our people from processes and procedures to company culture,” she said. “Over time their value grows. We want them to stay. When it comes to labor, it’s not always saving labor that’s the challenge. It’s finding good people and keeping them.

“It saves money to hire someone at a little more pay but they’re going to make every effort to do the job right. We have a lot of repeat customers and good employees help us keep them. I have lost customers because of bad delivery experiences from employees.”

When it comes to expenses, saving a

little bit here and there adds up. “It’s easy to get overwhelmed when you’re looking at all of the ways you’re spending money,” she said.

She also took the figures personally. “It took me a while to separate the numbers and the bookkeeping realm from my personal value. The bad numbers don’t reflect on you personally. When I could separate that the numbers didn’t say anything about me as a person, it’s easier to look at the numbers and the business critically.”

The rewards

Owning a nursery is a commitment. “It’s most important to love what you’re doing because it will be a lot of hard work,” Melissa said.

“For me having a business continually presents challenges that called on me to dig deep and figure it out. It toughed me that I had latent abilities that I never used. That was rewarding. I think that kind of stuff sticks with you and you go on to tackle the next thing and build muscle to tackle the next thing. We didn’t know it at the time, but it was one of the bravest things we ever did. We’re now well into our 2nd generation of family owners and seeing the hard work pay off.” ☺

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