

OREGON is Nursery Country



Brothers Steve (left) and Joe Gold now run the third-generation family-owned Gold Family Farms in Hillsboro, Oregon. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

FOUNDED
1965

OWNERS
Steve and Joe Gold

KNOWN FOR
Affordable, woody ornamentals

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GOLD FAMILY FARMS

BY MITCH LIES

There was a time, not too long ago in fact, when Gold Family Farms regularly shipped 15-, 20- and 25-gallon containers. “We don’t do a lot of those anymore,” said Steve Gold, co-owner and operator of the nursery. “They just take too long.”

Gold Family Farms, a wholesale grower in Hillsboro, today is focused on producing plants it can turn over in five years. The strategy is driven by changing consumer buying habits and the desire to keep down production costs.

The nursery also has dramatically scaled back the number of varieties it grows, going from the hundreds of varieties the nursery produced at the turn of the century to about 100 today.

“We have made some drastic changes over the years,” said Joe Gold, co-owner and operator. “When my father was running the business, they had upwards of 500 different varieties — from indoor plants, to annuals, to perennials to topiaries, to everything in between.

“And then when our generation took over from our parents, the very first thing we did was cut out a lot of the plants that we weren’t good at growing,” Joe said. “And then when Steve and I took full ownership, we reduced that some more.”

About 40 percent of the nursery’s output today is in three varieties, with boxwoods making up about 20 percent of that. Emerald Green arborvitae and Alberta spruce make up the remainder.



The farm's footprint has increased from about 80 acres in the late 1960s to the 400 acres it operates today, with most of that expansion occurring since the turn of the century. PHOTO COURTESY OF GOLD FAMILY FARMS

Changing strategy

Several factors have shaped the Golds' evolving strategy over the years, Joe said, including a change in consumer buying habits that started during the Great Recession. Buyers, Joe said, just aren't buying expensive plants like they once did.

"And also a new generation was coming in that wasn't really into taking care of plants," Joe said. "They just wanted something to plant and leave it. And so, we saw the signs on the wall, and we decided to greatly reduce our topiaries and some of the more expensive plants, and we changed our mentality into being cost effective."

The Golds also decided to focus on what they were good at growing, plants the family had produced for decades that had stood the test of time. And, when Steve and Joe bought out their siblings over a two-year period beginning in 2017, they further reduced their varietal output and focused on plants they could turn

over in five years or less.

"We've had to just in the last three-four years cut about 25 to 30 different varieties of plants off the list, because we weren't able to produce them in five years," Joe said.

In addition to providing more consistent sales opportunities, smaller plants are also less expensive to ship, another factor that helped drive their decision to scale back on big plants, particularly as shipping rates rose.

"We also determined that freight costs had been going up, particularly during COVID, and we realized that you could get more small plants on a truck, and so that was another deterrent to growing larger plants," Joe said.


The strategy has led to refined production practices and has had a big part in the farm's dramatic increase in plant production over the past several years. Just in the last year, Gold Family Farms increased

production of its larger sizes from 5,500 to 11,000 per day and increased production of its one-gallon plants from 18,000 to 20,000 per day to 25,000.

Efficiency with mechanization

The increase in plant production also can be traced to new machinery that the farm has developed and implemented, including an automated loading trailer the farm now uses for much of its production.

Developing new pieces of equipment is, in fact, another signature of this family farm. The farm keeps a fulltime engineer on staff, and Steve Gold, who holds a degree in engineering from Brigham Young University, worked as an engineer at Boeing before coming back to the family farm in 2008, giving them considerable expertise in the field.

And the farm works closely with employees when developing and implementing the equipment. 

Gold Family Farms



Mariela Ignacio packs down potting material as the pots come off the potting machine at Gold Family Farm's Laurel View Farm in Hillboro, Oregon. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

Steve refers to their philosophy as “bottom up” versus “top down.” “When management from the top down tells them we’re going to use this machine, there can be pushback because they don’t know how it works. So, working alongside the employees is the difference between building something inhouse versus trying to find something similar out in the industry that you can bring into the process. When you do that, a lot of times, they don’t know how to make it work.

“It’s not just developing the equipment,” Steve said. “It’s being able to effectively use the equipment and then having employees find ways to improve their productivity with the equipment.”

Farm’s history

Gold Family Farms traces its roots to the 1965 when the Gold family arrived in Oregon from Utah and established a plant nursery in Forest Grove. After Steve’s and Joe’s uncle, Paul Gold, died in a tragic farm accident that occurred while the family was preparing the land for nursery stock, the family decided to relocate to their current farm near Hillsboro.

As the farm grew over the years, so too did the surrounding cities.



Jesus Gomez loads potting mixture into the hopper for the potting machine at the Laurel View Farm. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

“Hillsboro had a population of about 6,000 when the farm was started,” Joe said. “Forest Grove had like 1,000 and Cornelius had like 1,450 people. Hillsboro is now over 107,000, Forest Grove is like 27,000 and Cornelius is about 15,000. So the towns around us have definitely grown exponentially.”

The farm’s footprint, meanwhile, has

increased from about 80 acres in the late 1960s to the 400 acres it operates today, with most of that expansion occurring since the turn of the century.

“We’ve doubled in the last 10 years,” Joe said.

The farm was run by Steve’s and Joe’s aunt Sally and their father, Gene, for many years before the next generation, which



Steve (right) and Joe Gold talk with Willian Gomez as he takes a break from feeding the potting machine at the Laurel View Farm at Gold Family Farms in Hillsboro, Oregon. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

included Steve's and Joe's siblings Clarka Hill and Matt Gold, took over in the early 2000s. Joe joined the farm in 2003 while completing a degree in business management from Brigham Young University and completing his Latter-day Saints mission. Beginning in 2017, Clarka and Matt opted to exit the company and Steve and Joe took over full ownership.

Most of the farm's output today is in woody ornamentals that it sells primarily to wholesalers or growers, with some going to garden centers. About 85 percent of its sales is in containers.

Make it affordable

The farm's emphasis on keeping production costs down permeates nearly every aspect of the operation, down to plant starts. "We create most of our plants," Steve said. "We don't bring in a lot of plants. So, again, that's how come we are able to specialize, because we can produce our plants at birth versus bringing in other companies' plants."

"Our forte is to make it affordable," Joe said. "We really cater to the numbers."

The company also strives to understand what it costs to produce a plant, Steve said.

"We are trying to understand our costs," Steve said. "It's been our experience that a lot of nurseries sell at market without knowing how much it is actually costing them. And that can be hard to determine, because you're growing it over four to six years, so how do you know how much that one plant costs? But that is something we feel is important to understand."

The farm employs 90 workers full-time and has an employee package that includes competitive wages, a healthcare program that pays 100 percent of healthcare costs, a 401K that employees can be fully vested in after one year and it offers scholarships for school and sports.

And the farm is working on developing good, affordable housing for its employees, a benefit they believe can be invaluable in their area in the future.

"In Washington County, there's limited inventory for housing, and definitely limited affordable housing," Joe said. "And it doesn't help us if they are spending most of their wages on housing and getting stressed about it, because that can mean that they're not doing well, and that can carry over into the workplace. So, we've got nine units approved and they will be nice, comfortable homes that are affordable.

"We are trying to have a sustainable farm where we are helping our employees with housing and food production, because the cost of living has gone up," Joe added. "So, we are trying to go a different route than say, just paying them more, because you pay them more and guess what, their rents will go up, too. So, if you can control the rent market, then you can help your employees feel secure, and we found that when you can take away some of those stresses, they tend to produce more effectively for us." ☺

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