



# The place to be

Destination nurseries offer customers a different kind of gardening goodness

One of French Prairie's biggest events is a fall festival with a pumpkin patch, pig races, tractor rides, slides, a corn maze and more. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

BY JON BELL

**B**eautiful, bucolic scenery. Colorful fields of flowers. Bounce-house castles, ice-cold beer and pigs that race their way around the track.

Many of Oregon's nurseries have found creative ways to invite customers to come and stay a little longer, enjoy a day out in the country and, of course, spend a little money. These destination nurseries are usually part wholesale nursery, part farmstand, part garden center and part food, beverage, art and music hotspot. It's not a model that works for every nursery, but for some, it's been key to prosperity and longevity.

Owners of four well-known destination nurseries discuss how and why they do it, and what's behind their success.

## Garland Nursery

Justin Read's life in the horticulture industry came full circle this past summer when he became the owner of **Garland Nursery**, a retail nursery in Corvallis, Oregon. His first job while studying horticulture at Oregon State University had been at Garland, and 12 years later, after working first in San Diego, California, and then Lake Oswego, Oregon, he got the opportunity to acquire the nursery from the family



Beyond the practicality, beautiful displays, special events and tasty snacks and drinks at Garland Nursery encourage visitors to stick around, owner Justin Read said. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

who'd owned it for 87 years.

"It's not really a takeover," Read said. "This place is incredible and there's an amazing legacy that lives here. I want to continue that."

What Read also wants to continue is Garland's reputation as a lovely place to visit.

"I don't know what it is, but Garland is naturally a destination," he said. "It's big, it's beautiful, there's not a whole lot

around us and so it's something to do."

The centerpiece of Garland is a historic red barn that serves as a garden center and gift shop amidst six acres of trees, shrubs, flowers and other plants. Read said the nursery earned a reputation over the years for having everything that a home gardener would need. Beyond the practicality, beautiful displays and tasty snacks and drinks encourage visitors to >>

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stick around. Read said Garland's level of customer service is also a reason people travel from afar.

"I think Garland has always been known for our service. We want people to bring their problems to us," he said. "We take the time to talk to people. It's not a one-word answer, and I think when you engage with someone, you make their experience better and they take something away with them."

Events have also helped Garland attract customers. Workshops throughout the year offer instruction on seasonal projects — such as wreath-making, succulent pumpkin design, and holiday tablescapes — and the annual Wine and Art in the Garden event features 40 art vendors, food carts, live music and more every summer.

"Overall, all of that stuff is really, really good," Read said. "But it's definitely more work. I mean, I'll start planning for Wine and Art in the Garden January 1 and the event's not until July. But it's worth it."

His advice for a nursery looking to branch out and try something new to bring more customers in? Just do it.

"I would say if they've been thinking of trying something new, an event or something, just try it," Read said. "It's silly not to. It may end up being the next big thing."

### French Prairie Gardens

Stacy Bunke's brother started a small fruit stand on his family's farm in St. Paul, Oregon, for an FFA project in 1987. Thirty-seven years later, **French Prairie Gardens** has grown into a fun farming destination that attracts close to 25,000 people a year. And part of what made it such a great escape? COVID-19.

"We have always been a destination, but we saw such an increase during COVID," Bunke said. "That fall, we were the only thing that was open."

The things that have kept people traveling to French Prairie Gardens includes a unique garden center packed with hand-planted hanging baskets [they do 3,500 each year], fresh produce, cold beer and cider and an array of events aimed at



Grace Yinger tidies a plant bench at Blooming Junction. Owner Grace Dinsdale says one of the ways the nursery attracts visitors is through education, with a range of classes and seminars on everything from food preservation to rose care and infused vinegars. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

entertaining folks for a day on the farm. Events have included a sunflower festival, an adult egg hunt, and a tulip and flower fest. French Prairie also hosts a fall pumpkin patch with pig races, tractor rides, slides, a corn maze and more.

"In the fall, we probably have anywhere from 10,000 to 15,000 people come out," Bunke said. "That's grown significantly."

She said the business has always been open to trying new ideas. Those that work stick around; those that don't get pulled.

"We keep thinking up new ideas and always trying new things," Bunke said. "There have been a few events that might not have been in our customers' wheelhouse, but others have turned out to be popular. It's just nice to be able to share something — our farm — that is so close to our hearts with other people, something that we might take for granted but for them it is awe inspiring."

### Blooming Junction

Grace Dinsdale's **Blooming Nursery** grows an impressive number of plant species: more than 2,200. But for years, it wasn't easy to showcase all of those species at the nursery.

A wholesale operation, Blooming Nursery wasn't intended to be a place where landscapers could stroll around and see what was on offer. For insurance reasons, customers and other visitors weren't

allowed to walk around the nursery, and trucks were often blocking the road.

"It always bothered me because we didn't have anywhere that really carried everything that we had," said Dinsdale, who started Blooming Nursery in 1982. "I always wanted to have a storefront that has everything we grow."

In 2008, Dinsdale's wish came true when she purchased a 50-acre farm just 10 minutes up the road and turned it into the retail nursery she always wanted. It had towering pine trees and a classic red barn — the perfect place to showcase Blooming Nursery's yield. She opened it as **Blooming Junction** in 2013, and though Dinsdale said it's still evolving, it's become quite the destination for folks looking for plants, fresh fruit and vegetables, bulbs, and local and artisan goods. All that, and a bucolic escape from the everyday world.

"The whole atmosphere is very peaceful and very farm-like," Dinsdale said. "People continually comment on how nice they feel here."

What also gets them to Blooming Junction is the wide variety of plants available. Dinsdale said people have come from as far away as Bellingham, Washington, for her perennials.

"I think the main pull for us is the product itself," she said. "Having a complete palate, an excellent selection and the quality of our plants is really what people

are looking for.”

Another way Dinsdale attracts visitors is through education. Blooming Junction hosts a wide range of classes and seminars on everything from food preservation and sourdough basics to rose care and infused vinegars. The farm also has regular events with artists and food trucks and is working on an event area as a result of repeated requests from visitors.

“It was clear from the start that we did not want to be a carnival,” Dinsdale said, “but we want people to come here primarily for the plants, the food and the ambiance.”

### Bauman’s Farm & Garden

It started as a small, quiet farm that grew fruits and veggies to sell to folks who would drive up and announce their presence with the honk of a horn.

That was 129 years and five generations ago.

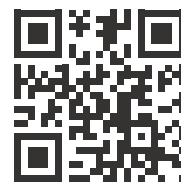
Today, **Bauman’s Farm & Garden** is a bustling farm and nursery with a bakery, deli, coffee shop, a garden center and an outdoor event space near Gervais, Oregon. They create 30,000 hanging baskets every year, and also offer fruits, vegetables, trees and nursery stock.

Then, each fall, more than 100,000 people visit Bauman’s for their classic Harvest Festival, complete with an apple cannon, hayrides, corn mazes, a bug train and plenty more.

“When we started the retail side of the business, we realized how important it was to have year-round appeal,” said Brian Bauman, general manager of Bauman’s. “We had been growing pumpkins for seed, and we’d bring out my class from my school to get pumpkins. Then my dad built a straw bale maze and a few other classes came out. Now we have 100,000 people a year at the pumpkin patch. We just started small and built on it from there.”

Indeed, Bauman’s has been built into a popular destination nursery, but it’s not something that happened over night. Instead, the Bauman family grew the operation slowly, adding new crops, attractions and appeal as a way to draw visitors out to the farm. >>

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“I like to tell people that our location is our biggest detriment,” Bauman said. “We are on the way to nothing. It’s just farmland and a busy highway with people driving by. We knew that to draw people, we needed to create events and give families a reason to come and spend the whole day here.”

The Harvest Festival certainly does that. But there’s more to Bauman’s than pumpkins and hay mazes. For the past few years, the farm has also been part of a now two-day gardening extravaganza called GardenPalooza. The event goes further back, but Bauman’s took it over and moved it to their farm. It offers plants for sale, garden art, tools, education and other attractions to get people excited about the upcoming gardening season.

Bauman’s has U-cut Christmas trees in the winter, an animal barn and petting zoo, and its bakery, deli and coffee shop give visitors a reason to linger on the farm



Each fall, more than 100,000 people visit Bauman’s for their classic Harvest Festival, complete with an apple cannon, hayrides, corn mazes, a bug train and plenty more. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

and enjoy a rural escape.

On top of all that, one of Brian Bauman’s cousins, Christine Walter, started making hard cider at the farm about eight years ago, honoring the legacy of their great-grandfather, who did the same on the farm in the early 1900s. Guests drank up Walter’s cider — including a unique loganberry version — so much that

she needed to find a place to expand. That led to Bauman’s On Oak, a tap house and production facility located in Portland’s Central Eastside neighborhood.

Bauman said diversification has been key to their success, but it’s also what adds the biggest challenge to the business.

“Diversification is wonderful, but it’s a whole other level,” he said.

The company hires more than 100 people for six weeks just for the Harvest Festival. Greenhouses that are used for growing the hanging baskets must be converted into attractions for fall, then cleaned up after that. There’s parking and traffic and so many other concerns, but Bauman’s has figured out how to make it all work. A big piece of the puzzle, Bauman said, is to start small and stick with what works. And don’t make people wait in lines.

“Don’t bite off more than you can chew,” he said. “Start with something one weekend, and if it goes well, then maybe do two. Build it out from there. And I always say the easiest way to ruin an event is people having to wait in lines. You need to be able to handle the crowds. It takes time and practice and infrastructure, so just start small and build from there.”

*Jon Bell is an Oregon freelance journalist who writes about everything from Mt. Hood and craft beer to real estate and the great outdoors. His website is [JBellInk.com](http://JBellInk.com).*

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