



Brandon Schmidt (left) and Steven Ekstrom started with a 10-acre plot and have grown Ekstrom & Schmidt Nursery to 160 acres and have become known for Japanese maples, dogwoods and redbuds. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

FOUNDED

2013

OWNERS

Steven Ekstrom and Brandon Schmidt

KNOWN FOR

Japanese maples, dogwoods, and redbuds

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EKSTROM & SCHMIDT NURSERY

BY VIC PANICKUL

The seed for **Ekstrom & Schmidt Nursery LLC** started with a 10-acre plot that Brandon Schmidt bought in 2010. In the time since, he and his business partner Steven Ekstrom have grown the nursery to more than 160 acres and have become known for Japanese maples, dogwoods and redbuds.

“We’ve become known for good cash-and-carry plants for small garden centers looking for trees and shrubs,” Ekstrom said. “We’ve developed a reputation for nice quality, low-cost plants for garden

centers. It was the precedent that my dad had of being fair with customers,”

The owners of Ekstrom & Schmidt grew up with different backgrounds and different educations, but their love of plants is what ended up bringing them together as business partners.

Schmidt grew up in Damascus, Oregon, and earned a funeral science degree from Mount Hood Community College. “I was a mortician,” Schmidt said.

Ekstrom grew up at **Ekstrom Nursery**, where his dad was partner with his uncle.

Schmidt met the Ekstrom family at church and went to the same high school

Ekstrom & Schmidt Nursery



Ekstrom & Schmidt has become known for good cash-and-carry plants for small garden centers looking for trees and shrubs. The nursery has developed a reputation for nice quality, low-cost plants for garden centers. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

as the Ekstrom kids. He really got to know them during the years dating Steven's older sister, Heidi. He didn't know at the time that later marrying Heidi would lead to him working in the nursery industry.

"I was a mortician for five years and we were living in Hood River," Schmidt said.

He and his wife would come down to visit family and friends, and he would tease his father-in-law, Jim Ekstrom (former co-owner of Ekstrom Nursery), and say "I should just quit the funeral home and come work at the nursery for you. It was almost a passing joke."

Schmidt was getting to the point where he was considering managing the funeral home and eventually buying it from the owner when his father-in-law called and said in all seriousness, "We could use you on the farm and be happy to have you."

It took three months for he and his wife to decide to do it, put their house up for sale and move into one on the nursery farmhouses.

"It was 2006," Brandon said. "I kind of jumped in with no previous nursery knowledge or experience and it was a baptism by fire. I worked in the shop, I



The sun rises over the nursery with Mt. Hood in the background. PHOTO BY BRANDON SCHMIDT

drove trucks, loaded trucks, worked irrigation, spraying, planting. Basically, anything that needed to be done." By doing so, he also learned all the facets of the nursery business.

Ekstrom, on the other hand, grew up on the nursery. "I spent mornings weeding when I was a kid. I'd help with inventory and walk down the row with a clicker," Ekstrom said. "The nursery was a part of



From right: Placido Rodriguez, Brandon Schmidt, Benjamin Romero, Mateo Lucas, Andres Lucas-Mendoza and Cipriano Luna remove plants from pots to prepare them for re-potting.

PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

growing up. They told us when we were 12 we could start driving the row tractors, and that's the day we looked forward to. My dad and grandpa and uncle Don were gracious and got us all involved."

He went to Western Oregon University and graduated in 2010 with a bachelor's in marketing and came home and started to work in the family nursery.

Going out on their own

Ekstrom was still in college at the time he bought the 10-acre plot in 2010, but they were both working at Ekstrom Nursery.

"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 felt it even more important to start our own. It took a while to get it going."

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

sales we needed at the beginning.

"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 square up at the end of the year. It worked out really well." Hiring workers that were 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 2014, a nearby 20-acre property with an existing nursery went up for sale. They decided it was a good opportunity to purchase it as it had five greenhouses, a barn with an office and a loading dock. This is the current location of Ekstrom & Schmidt Nursery in Troutdale, Oregon.

In the time since, they added five more greenhouses and another large barn and cooler. The original property had overgrown nursery stock in the ground. Since then, Ekstrom & Schmidt has transformed that into 13 acres of container-grown stock. Schmidt later sold the small 10-acre property and purchased another 20-acre property and lived on it and farmed it.

When Ekstrom's father finally split from his brother, he brought over 160 acres from his share of Ekstrom Nursery, along with a portion of the client list.

"My Dad set us up for where we

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Ekstrom & Schmidt Nursery

are now,” Ekstrom said. “From growing up counting trees and weeding getting opportunity to run equipment and play in the nursery, he was always there for us. Our nursery rests on his reputation. That set the tone for us. He has been generous to everyone in our industry, helping guys like us starting our own farms.”

Developing a specialty

When Ekstrom and Schmidt first started, they planted in the ground and grew things they knew that Ekstrom Nursery needed. They were 80–90% field grown and B&B. Now, the production has flipped, with 70% of the plants grown in the field and finished in containers.

Over the years, they’ve refined their focus on products and their business.

“We’re known for Japanese maples, dogwoods, and redbuds,” Schmidt said. “Maples have always been a big part of

our nursery.”

The duo have developed a market for themselves and 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.

Some 70% of the nursery’s customers are small independent garden centers or local chains and 30% are re-wholesalers who pick up material and sell to landscapers.

What’s next

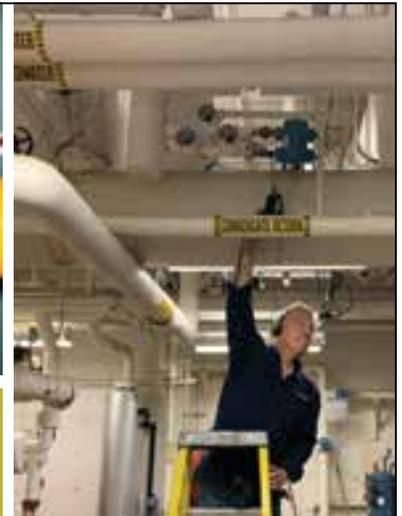
Schmidt said they would continue their focus on independent garden centers.

“We want to provide more inventory and add more variety of sizes to broaden our reach,” Ekstrom said. “We want to also have a selection of bigger finished plants and continue to add new popular varieties.”

“Most of our plants are DIY sized and some of our customers want more landscape-sized plants for their customers,” Ekstrom said. “We want a sizing spectrum so that we can meet the needs of all of our customers. That’s the goal.”

“We want to be a one-stop-shop for our customers so that they don’t have to go somewhere else to fill their orders,” Schmidt said. ☺

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