



In June, Heritage Seedlings & Liners founder Mark Krautman (right) sold the nursery to longtime employee Octavio Martinez. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

**FOUNDED**  
1982

**OWNER**  
Octavio Martinez

**KNOWN FOR**  
Liners of rare and unusual deciduous plants

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# HERITAGE SEEDLINGS & LINERS

BY JON BELL

**S**ometimes Mark Krautmann looks back on the life he's lived thus far and can't believe it.

A Missouri farm boy, he met the first love of his life, Jolly, a native of Taiwan, while they were both studying soil sciences at Texas A&M University. They married and spent the next 49 years together.

Along the way, they founded **Heritage Seedlings & Liners** in Salem in 1982, raising rare and unique seedlings, rootstock and woody plants at a time when interest in those kinds of trees and

plants was just about to explode. They raised a family, traveled the world and loved each other while growing their nursery business into a hugely successful endeavor that today spans 20 acres of greenhouse production and more than 2,300 acres of farmland.

"I wake up every day, honestly, and I think, 'I can't believe I've lived this life,'" Krautman said. "Jolly and I were very close as a couple, as business partners and as parents. Everything was just delightful. We had such an amazing experience. It's been longer and more rich and nuanced than I could have ever dreamed."

Krautmann speaks partly in past 

## Heritage Seedlings & Liners



The nursery focuses on producing seedlings and liners of rare and unusual ornamental plants. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

tense, as he's recently entered a season of transition. Last year, sadly, Jolly passed away after a two-year bout with brain cancer.

And though he's not stepping fully away from Heritage, in June Krautmann solidified a deal to sell the woody plant part of the business to Octavio Martinez, who first started working for Heritage as a summertime employee when he was 13 — some 25 years ago.

Octavio couldn't find a better heritage to follow, so to speak.

"I think I always knew that there was something that I wanted to pursue here at Heritage, especially with Mark and Jolly," Martinez said. "They've always had a passion for the way they run their business and how they treat the people who work for them."

### Planting the seeds

After earning their master's degrees from Texas A&M, Krautmann and Jolly moved west to the Willamette Valley in the late 1970s. He took a job with a seed company, then worked for a nursery in Portland doing everything from loading and unloading trucks to pruning.

While he was there, he also got to



Nancy Gonzalez (right) and Juana Rivera tape Hearts A'Fire® redbuds to their stakes in one of the hoop houses at Heritage Seedlings and Liners. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

meet all the suppliers, one of whom happened to be renowned horticulturalist Verl Holden. Their meeting sparked a friendship that lasts to this day — and that set Krautmann on his horticultural path.

"Verl really inspired me a lot," he said. "I just found it utterly fascinating. Here's a guy using his knowledge of soil microbiology to benefit his propagation

program with kinnikinnick and delivering these absolutely beautiful one-gallon plants. He was just so proud, like a parent, of each of them."

His interest in more unique species piqued, Krautmann started growing rare seedling trees like paperbark maple, katsura and *Stewartia* on his back porch. He sold some to the nursery where he

worked, and when that business sold, he focused solely on getting the seedling business off the ground.

“I kind of vetted my proposal to some industry stalwarts, that what I was interested in doing was growing unusual, really rare seedlings,” Krautmann said. “Basically, their comment across the board was, ‘Oh, you’ll never make any money growing that oddball stuff.’ Except they used a different four-letter word there.”

But with little to lose — Jolly had stable work by then — Krautmann forged ahead with the oddball stuff and it took off. Key to Heritage’s early success was focusing more on the market back East as opposed to Oregon. Krautmann said the region had a “more robust sense of variety and landscape plants and rare plants,” so when he took out ads in nursery magazines and traveled back East with samples, buyers were hungry.

“We got fortunate because we rode that wave of emerging interest in unusual ornamentals and just kind of caught everything just right,” he said.

### Good fortune

In the ensuing years, Heritage flourished, doubling in size annually for a run of at least 15 years. The Krautmanns jumped from renting 5 acres to buying 20 and putting up greenhouses, eventually growing the nursery to its present size. Yet while the rare and unusual seedlings were popular, the nursery needed more of a bread-and-butter crop to generate cash flow.

The answer: disease-free Japanese maple root stock. The plants are very susceptible to a bacterial pathogen called *Pseudomonas syringae*. Krautmann said Heritage grew all of its Japanese maples under greenhouse shelter, protecting them from late fall frost that makes them especially vulnerable to *Pseudomonas* infection.

“Our seedling maples are unusually well-grown,” Krautmann said, “so they basically sold themselves because people would buy them and they would always come back for them because they never lost expensive maple grafts due to latent *Pseudomonas* infection in our rootstocks.”

They also added a wildflower seed



Heritage Seedlings and Liner owner Octavio Martinez checks in on head grafter Feliz Texele.  
PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

business to serve the habitat restoration market. Today, that business offers hundreds of Pacific Northwest native seeds for plants like vine maples, columbine, Oregon iris and sickle-keeled lupine.

On top of lots of hard work, fortuitous timing and the addition of a grafting arm of the business in the mid 1990s, Krautmann pins plenty of Heritage’s good fortune on the people who have worked for the nursery. He said he’s always tried to pay his workers well and done what he can to elicit their loyalty.

For Krautmann, that’s not just lip service. In recent years, he’s added mobile homes on his properties so several year-round employees have places to live and raise their families.

“We don’t charge them much rent, and it gives them a way to feel the stability of a home,” Krautmann said.

### A special bond

Martinez started working for Krautmann the summer he was 13, and he loved it from the get-go.

“I just fell in love with the work, the industry, just the idea of growing plants and making the world greener,” he said.

He worked at Heritage in the summers but came on full-time after high school. Initially he took on entry-level positions. Then, with the bonus of being ambitious, skilled and bilingual, he made his way up to crew leader, supervisor, inventory manager and, eventually, general manager. And though he had opportunities to leave, he never wanted to.

He also said he and Krautmann developed a personal and very tight relationship over the years, especially as Martinez’s father wasn’t involved in his early life.

“There is a special bond that he and I have,” he said.

Mark agreed.

“He’s a very ambitious and very clever young man, and he and I just get along,” Krautmann echoed. “I tell people that he is like my brother, my best friend and my son, all of ‘em wrapped in one.”

### On the horizon

About eight years ago, when Martinez hit his 30s, he started thinking about how the rest of his life was going to play out. He wasn’t necessarily thinking about becoming an owner at Heritage, but he was curious to know what Krautmann had in mind for the future.

While Krautmann didn’t have answers at the time, he came back to Martinez a few years later as retirement entered the picture. Krautmann knew he had three main options. He could shutter the business, he could sell it to an outsider or he could sell it to Martinez and, in the process, keep the culture, people and legacy intact.

“And he said he’d rather do that because — and this is exactly what he said — ‘I can sit and feel good about it when I wake up in the morning and drink my coffee,’” Martinez said.

The plans took a few years to unfold, but in June of this year, the deal was

## Heritage Seedlings & Liners

done. Martinez acquired the woody plant and seedling side of the business, while Krautmann retained the native seed business. Both still fall under the Heritage name to take advantage of the brand value that's been built up over the decades.

The unique structuring of the deal allows Martinez to acquire all the shares of Heritage stock through projected profits over the next 10 years. He'll also lease the land from Krautmann and eventually purchase it from him.

As for Krautmann, his future sounds like a retirement in name only. He'll be around to assist Martinez in a consulting role while also still heading up the seed business. He and his new wife, Nancy Buley — the longtime director of communications for **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.** — have some international travel planned, including a trip to Turkey next year.

They now live on a farm in McMinnville, where Krautmann is focused

on a 500-acre oak restoration project, and he's also very involved in both the Oregon Garden and the planned Portland Botanical Gardens.

Krautman said he's confident that the woody plant side of Heritage is in good hands with Martinez.

"I'm just so pleased that it's an opportunity for him and, really, for us to move on but still stay involved," he said. "I think it's also a good, timely example to my peers to not overlook the people who made their companies successful."

### What's next?

Martinez said his goal for Heritage is to not only maintain its reputation for excellence and unique varieties, but to elevate it to the next level. That will likely mean adding new varieties while also staying focused on the nursery's cash crops.

He isn't necessarily focused on growth, but on improving what's already

in place. One recent example: He switched the nursery's one-gallon pots from traditional solid pots to air pruning pots, which help cultivate healthier root systems.

"My goal is really to represent and to continue to take Heritage to the next level in quality and the variety of plants we offer," Martinez said. "I want to continue to keep Heritage as a unique place where you can find the woodies that you don't find anywhere else."

"I'm excited and I'm humbled," he continued. "Just seeing how Mark took me under his wing and just rewarded or acknowledged the hard work that I put in throughout the years — I'm very grateful." ©

*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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