

# Two decades in the making

**This is officially column number 181. That is a lot of time, a lot of roads traveled together, a lot of success, challenges and heartbreak.**

I feel deeply honored to have served as your executive director for the last 15 years. What is more astounding to me is that this is my 20<sup>th</sup> year at the Oregon Association of Nurseries.

## Two decades of economic change

Over the years, both the United States and Oregon have undergone significant economic transformations.

While national trends have defined much of the direction, Oregon's economy has followed a path of its own, often mirroring national changes but also reflecting unique regional strengths and vulnerabilities.

I was elevated from your government relations director to the top spot in the midst of the devastating Great Recession. This financial crisis reshaped the U.S. economy, exposing vulnerabilities in the housing market, consumer debt, and financial institutions. In the aftermath, job recovery was slow but steady, and the 2010s became a period of long but uneven growth.

Oregon lost over a third of its nursery producers during this period. Our sales dipped to levels that were terrifying. The industry had crested to just over \$1 billion in sales before the recession. By 2010, it had sunk substantially to \$745 million.

Over the next 15 years, the nursery reattained and surpassed the \$1 billion mark, but we are different. We are more cautious. The rapid advancement of internet sales and smartphones as a tool has changed the very nature of the business. Sadly, there are fewer in the industry, but we remain resilient.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dealt a sudden and severe blow to the economy. Unemployment soared, busi-

nesses closed, and entire industries — especially hospitality, travel, and retail — were upended.

My long-standing relationship with then-governor Kate Brown paid off. It was not certain that the nursery industry would be deemed essential to remain open during the early days of the pandemic. We made the case we could sell to the public through our elite retailers and producers, efficiently and safely.

What was far from certain was our out-of-state markets. We had trucks leave Oregon, only to be turned back at their destination states.

Rather than throwing up our hands, Oregon, Minnesota, Florida, and Arizona created an interactive map with help from the states' departments of agriculture. It showed the real-time status of each state. It was a game changer. It allowed our industry to fill the exploding need for plant material, demanded by people stuck at home.

## The blessings of leadership

Patrick Newton is now the 20<sup>th</sup> president I am serving under. During my time, I have had the unique privilege to work with our volunteer leaders, board members and presidents. Each have distinguished themselves and brought their considerable knowledge, perspective and gifts to shape the association.

The phrase "leaders emerge during the times they are needed" is attributed to John Kenneth Galbraith. He observed that leaders often come to the forefront in challenging circumstances. During crises, such individuals with strong character and vision are more likely to take charge and lead effectively. I subscribe to this notion 100%.

A president or a board cannot choose the economic or political times they inherit.

We have taken a measured approach during good times — making wise investments in making Oregon's nursery industry stronger — and we've displayed steely gumption during times that test patience and souls.

We are different now. Both good and



Jeff Stone  
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

bad circumstances and experiences shape who we are as an industry, as a business and as people. It is the people who make this association successful. We have a committed board, visionary leaders and the best association staff in the nation. There are a lot of nursery industry associations with talented staff. I admire and value the tremendous work and effort by my colleagues. I will absolutely put up the OAN staff against any of them and with great confidence declare that ours is the gold standard for serving the nursery membership.

Our staffers are largely invisible to the general membership, but you see their work. It is an email about the trusted services the association provides to make business life just a little easier. It is the positioning and marketing of the industry to extend your hard-earned dollars to buy and sell green goods. It is the people who are upgrading our first-of-its-kind Nursery Guide website, which we expect to relaunch this month. It will extend your reach to markets wherever they reside.

## A note of personal thanks

We have seen a number of impactful industry leaders pass away over the past year or so. When this happens, it reminds me how much I appreciate the fact that our industry is like a family — to each other and to me personally.

There are too many people in this industry to mention who have shaped who I am. They have made me a better person, husband and father. I treasure every day I serve you and will remain doing so until it is time for my own curtain call. ☺