

Digger

FEBRUARY 2026

Tropical tones

Consumer fascination with reddish hues fuels a growing trend

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Greenhouse automation ups efficiency, quality

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Terra Gardens has accessibility in mind

PAGE 25

Lighting the way for houseplants

PAGE 33

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On the cover: *Aglaonema* 'Siam Aura'. PHOTO COURTESY OF PORTLAND NURSERY

On this page: Left: *Calathea ornata*. PHOTO COURTESY OF PORTLAND NURSERY Right: A "top trimmer" machine from GK Machine uniformly trims any stems left in soil crates after the mature flowers are cut at Oregon Flowers. PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON FLOWERS

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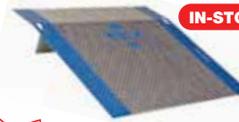
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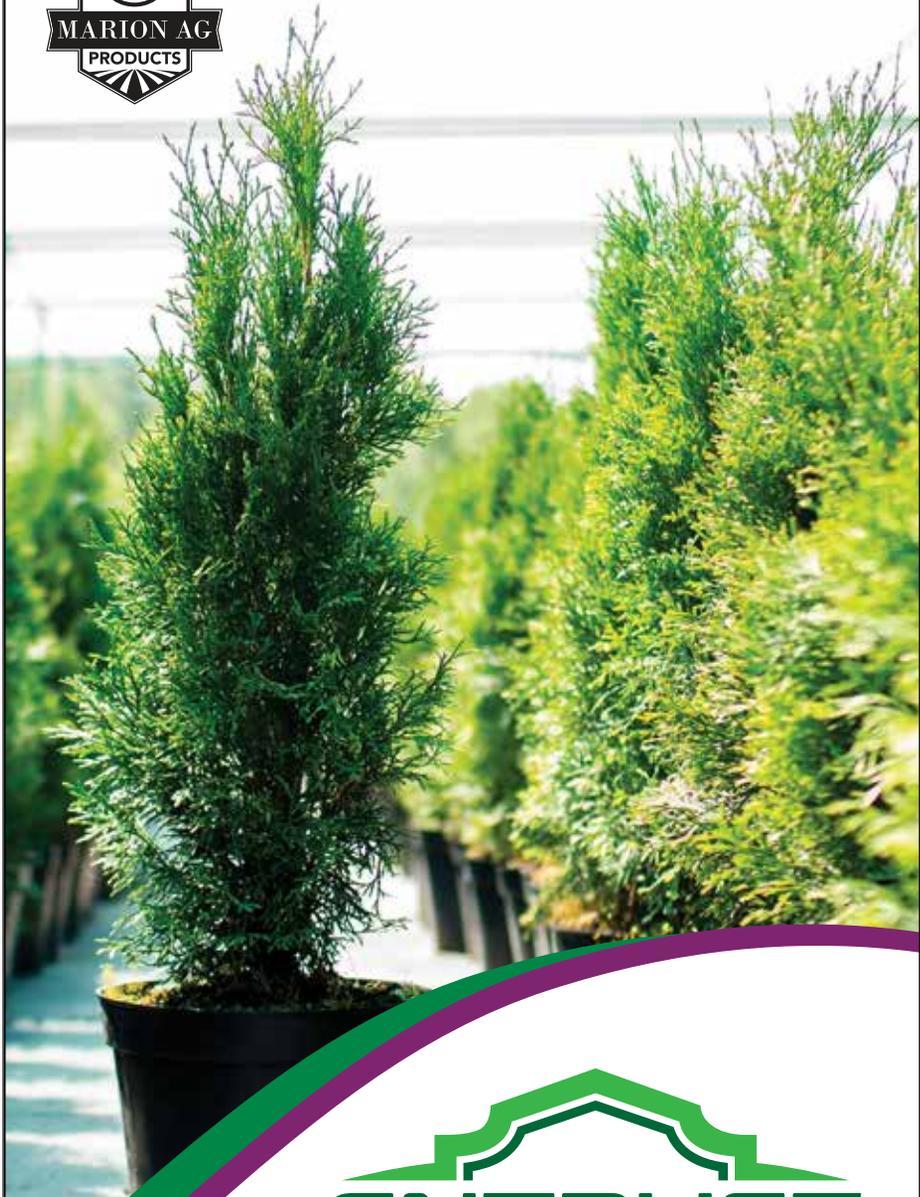


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Don't make mountains out of molehills

As we head into the new year, I hope we can all help ourselves make 2026 just a little bit easier.



Patrick Newton

How can we reduce some of the stress we run into every day? It's human nature to take a small, insignificant issue and turn it into something that derails an entire day, or even an entire week. In the end, we are in control of how we handle adversity. We get to dictate our response.

There's a quote that always comes to mind this time of year: "Don't make mountains out of molehills." My dad left me with that piece of advice back in 2007. I was probably venting about an issue that didn't really warrant the reaction I was giving it. At the time, I didn't think much of it. I likely just nodded and said, "Yeah."

Over the years, however, that saying has worked its way into my daily thinking. It shows up in the middle of a hectic day, during tough conversations, or when something small or big threatens to get the better of me.

Running a nursery, and a business, means there's always something going sideways. You could fill a book with all the little fires that pop up in a year.

And that's all before you factor in life outside the nursery. Raising a family, keeping up with friends, and trying to be present at home while the business never really stops moving.

It's easy to feel like the small things are stacking up faster than you can keep up. That's when my dad's words come back around: Don't make mountains out of molehills.

It's not that the molehills don't matter. They do. You still must deal with them.

But perspective matters. A late truck or a missed irrigation cycle can feel like the end of the world in the moment, but a week later it's just another story.

When COVID hit, it felt like a mountain. Every day brought new uncertainty, and it seemed like the climb would never end. But we kept moving forward, one step at a time, and slowly that moun-

tain got smaller. As it turns out, COVID marked the beginning of some good years for the nursery industry.

I also think back to the sudden oak death we dealt with years back. It was a scary, mountainous topic. There was fear and uncertainty. It ended up getting resolved with some workarounds and ended up being a molehill — a large one, granted — rather than a mountain.

With the support and leadership of the OAN and the Oregon Department of Agriculture, we believe we can accomplish the same outcome for the Japanese beetle. Certainly, it feels mountainous now but I'm optimistic that this too shall pass.

Years from now, we'll look back at Japanese beetle the same way we look back at sudden oak death. It was difficult, it forced change, but we figured it out and kept growing.

All this to say, that doesn't mean this year won't be challenging. It will be. But growers are problem-solvers by nature, and we've proven time and again that we can rise to the occasion.

As we move into the new year, I'm trying to keep that mindset front and center. Not every problem deserves to become a mountain. Some days, it's enough to recognize the difference, take a breath, and keep moving.

Here's to a new year of steady growth, a little more patience, and fewer mountains along the way. ☺



Calendar

Get the word out about your event! Email details to Calendar@OAN.org by the 10th day of the month to be included in the next issue of *Digger*.

SEVERAL DATES IN FEBRUARY

SAIF AGRICULTURAL SAFETY SEMINARS

SAIF invites nursery professionals to attend one of several free Agricultural Safety Seminars in February around Oregon. Some sessions will be conducted in Spanish. Seminars are held from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and include lunch. The cities and dates for February are: Bandon, February 24; Clackamas, February 19; Hood River, February 12; Mt. Angel, February 4; Salem, February 6; Wilsonville, February 26. Cities and dates for Spanish sessions in February are: Clackamas, February 20; Hood River, February 12; Mt. Angel, February 5; Salem, February 7; Wilsonville, February 27. For more information and to register, go to SAIF.com/AgSeminars.

FEBRUARY 3-5

PROGREEN EXPO

ProGreen EXPO is the only green industry conference in the Rocky Mountain Region of its kind. More than 5,000 green industry professionals gather every year at the Colorado Convention Center in Denver to gain vital knowledge and skills to improve business, educate employees and discover the latest information for the upcoming season. Inside the EXPO, attendees get a hands-on look at the latest green technology and products from over 225 exhibiting companies. For more information or to register, go to ProGreenExpo.com.

FEBRUARY 6

2026 DUNN CARNEY AG SUMMIT

Dunn Carney's Ag Summit returns to the Salem Convention Center at 7:30 a.m. Friday, February 6, 2026. The half-day conference features ag industry leaders from around the region and members of Dunn Carney's Ag Team. Enjoy a morning of lively panel discussions and presentations covering recent regulatory developments, legal issues, and best practices in the agriculture industry. Complimentary breakfast and lunch are provided. Plan to stay and reconnect with friends and colleagues. There is no cost to attend. To register, go to DunnCarney.com/AgSummit2026.

FEBRUARY 12

GROWING YOUR INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Looking to expand your global reach? Whether you're an experience exporter or just starting, the Oregon Department of Agriculture and the Western United States Agricultural Trade Association (WUSATA) are hosting an educational seminar on programs designed to help agricultural businesses maximize their global potential. Whether you're new to exporting, actively shipping internationally, or considering expansion. First-time attendees will



PHOTO COURTESY OF LITTLE PRINCE OF OREGON

MARCH 7

SECOND ANNUAL WINTER JEWELS' HELLEBORE SALE

Little Prince of Oregon is continuing the tradition of hosting an annual sale of Winter Jewels Hellebore after the nursery purchased the brand from Ernie and Marietta O'Byrne at Northwest Garden Nursery in 2023. The sale is from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. on March 7 and is open to the public. RSVP is required by going to LittlePrincePlants.com/Hellebores.

discover funding opportunities, while current participants can learn what's new for 2026 and get personalized guidance. The free event is 9 a.m.-2:30 p.m. February 12 and will be held in Portland, Oregon. Location will be disclosed after registration. Registration deadline is February 5. For more information or to register, go to TinyURL.com/ODAExportSeminar.

FEBRUARY 13

NEXGEN ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING

Save the date for the NexGen Annual Business Meeting from 6-9 p.m. on Friday, February 13. It will feature the group's business meeting, annual officer elections and a round table discussion on issues pertinent to the group. The event will be held at Langdon Farms Golf Club, "The Gallery", 24377 Airport Road N.E. in Aurora, Oregon. NexGen is one of the Oregon Association of Nurseries' Leadership Groups. NexGen is open to all members of the nursery and greenhouse industry with a special focus on those who are new to the industry or rising in their careers. To register, go to OAN.org/Events.

FEBRUARY 26-MARCH 1

PORTLAND SPRING HOME & GARDEN SHOW

This show from the Home Builders of Greater Portland kicks off the gardening season with display gardens, speakers and booths from home improvement firms and gardening businesses. The show is from 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday; and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday at the Portland Expo Center, 2060 Marine Drive West, Portland, Oregon. Don't

forget to pick up a copy of the brand new, 2026-2027 Plant Something Oregon Road Map! Single-day admission is \$17; multi-day passes are \$28. More info at HomeShowPDX.com.

FEBRUARY 28

OAN MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

Secure your Oregon Association of Nurseries membership today and stay connected to the resources, advocacy and community that drive our industry forward. Annual OAN memberships expired on December 31, but the grace period to renew for 2026 extends through February 28. Renew your membership now at OAN.org/Renew.

VARIOUS DATES

FREE CPR/FIRST AID CLASSES

The Oregon Association of Nurseries is once again offering FREE first aid and CPR certification training for OAN members in 2026, thanks to their continuing partnership with SAIF. These classes provide hands-on instruction in small group settings, covering essential first aid and lifesaving CPR skills. Certifications are valid for two years, and sessions are available in both English and Spanish from 8 a.m.-12:30 p.m. English: February 18, March 18, June 17, July 15, September 16, October 14, November 18, December 16. Spanish: February 19, March 19, June 18, July 16, September 17, October 15, November 19, December 17. All classes take place at the OAN office: 29751 S.W. Town Center Loop West, in Wilsonville. Register at OAN.org/CPR. ©



Northwest News

OAN members and chapters are encouraged to send in relevant news items, such as new hires, new products, acquisitions, honors received and past or upcoming events. Email News@OAN.org.



Amanda Staehely

From ballet to politics, Amanda Staehely is en pointe

Amanda Staehely spent most of her life pursuing a ballet career but at the age of 22, she injured her ankle and derailed those dreams, the *Capital Press* newspaper (Salem, Oregon) reported in a feature article on Staehely. She had already been contemplating back-up careers before that ill-fated landing cut short her time with the Oregon Ballet Theatre.

She first turned to running a Pilates studio, but then she became more involved in **Columbia Nursery**, her husband's business near Canby, Oregon. The nursery industry gave Staehely the opportunity to explore her interest in politics. Before joining the Oregon Ballet Theatre, Staehely had considered studying political science, and she grew up debating politics with her father.

Staehely rose through the leadership ranks at the Oregon Association of Nurseries where she became president in 2024-2025. She advocated for the industry in the halls of the Oregon Legislature, U.S. Congress and with representatives of federal agencies on matters ranging from agricultural overtime to pest inspection funding. "She's been an exceptional advocate for the industry at the state and federal levels," said Executive Director Jeff Stone.

More at TinyURL.com/BalletToPolitics.



The Oregon Association of Nurseries continues to work closely with ODA to help protect Oregon growers' pathways for out-of-state shipping as Japanese beetle regulations evolve. PHOTO COURTESY OF USDA APHIS

OREGON CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION PUSHES FOR JAPANESE BEETLE FUNDING

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon) has spearheaded a letter with the entire Oregon congressional delegation seeking emergency funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to restart Japanese beetle mitigation efforts by the Oregon Department of Agriculture until permanent funding is established.

"While the OAN believes that funds will be hard to come by, the effort to infuse dollars into the ODA's Japanese Beetle Program is the top priority for the association," Executive Director Jeff Stone said.

The OAN will convene companies that have the ability to scout, trap and mitigate the beetle and will build a plan to assist growers during flight season this year (June-September).

OAN continues to work closely with ODA to help protect Oregon growers' pathways for out-of-state shipping as Japanese beetle regulations evolve. As part of that effort, the Oregon Department of Agriculture has been engaged in conversations with its counterparts in several Western states.

At an OAN member Zoom briefing held in December, ODA Division Director of Plant

Protection and Conservation Chris Benemann provided an update for shipping to these states:

California, Washington, Idaho, Utah and Texas: Shipping of regulated articles must be certified starting May 1, 2026.

New Mexico: For nurseries who are already trapping to meet the New Mexico requirements in 2025, the process will not change. Nurseries had to sign a compliance agreement with both the New Mexico Department of Agriculture as well as the ODA by February 1, 2026. Benemann said ODA is working with New Mexico to try to reduce the paperwork that growers must manage. The ODA is asking New Mexico to accept ODA's compliance agreement as sufficient.

Colorado and Nevada: ODA is in discussion with both states for a certification start date. Each state's quarantines have different requirements, and ODA is sending them the Oregon state-wide Japanese beetle data from 2025 for review.

Hawaii and British Columbia, Canada: ODA is under discussion with these state/provincial governments. Decisions are pending.

Alaska: No special certification is required. However, if you already meet Category 1 or 2 standards for nursery stock, include a certificate of quarantine with shipments. As per the Harmonization Plan, states should meet the >>

Northwest News

requirement standards of the receiving state. Shipments should include regular bills of lading/invoices and an ODA nursery shipping document. Alaska will be monitoring incoming shipments for signs of Japanese beetle, and has authority to reject and hold shipments.

Regulated articles include plants with roots and soil, grass sod, soil, compost or growing media that is not commercially packaged and any article that could harbor Japanese beetle eggs, larvae, or adults.

ODA said if nurseries are shipping a regulated article to a Category 1 or 2 state, you will need to:

- Enter into a compliance agreement with the ODA.
- Employ approved treatments and/or approved trapping.
- Apply for a Certificate of Quarantine Compliance (CQC) or phytosanitary certificate for shipments.

ODA has been working diligently with the OAN on the most-cost effective alternatives for funding a Japanese beetle program. In the 2026 legislative short session, OAN will be pursuing a nursery license fee increase of 18.7% through rule-making, which would raise \$700,000 over the two-year budget cycle, said Stone.

“The ODA said it would take \$1.5 million to fund a Japanese beetle program in 2026–27, so we’re asking for general fund dollars for the rest of it,” Stone said.

OAN will also ask the Oregon Legislature to authorize ODA to hire employees needed to complete the work, OAN contract lobbyist Bill Perry said.

To view OAN Japanese beetle shipping pathway and compliance updates, go to [OAN.org/JapaneseBeetle](https://oan.org/JapaneseBeetle). To view ODA’s Japanese beetle resources, go to [TinyURL.com/ODAJB](https://tinyurl.com/ODAJB).

WASHINGTON STATE JAPANESE BEETLE NUMBERS ARE UP

The Washington State Department of Agriculture said WSDA Pest Program trappers caught 72,626 Japanese Beetles in 2025, nearly three times the number trapped in 2024, the Pacific Northwest Ag



Gold Family Farms & Landscape Outlet aims to offer retail access to landscape-quality plants — both in quantity and variety — at wholesale-level pricing for professional landscapers and DIY customers alike. PHOTO COURTESY OF GOLD FAMILY FARMS & LANDSCAPE OUTLET

Network reported.

The areas where beetles have been detected has expanded but the majority were trapped in south central Washington:

In Grandview, Sunnyside, Outlook, Mabton and Prosser, 68,237 beetles were trapped, up from 24,754 in 2024.

Wapato saw a decrease in catches with 1,117 catches this year compared to 1,546 catches in 2024.

The Tri-Cities saw an increase in beetle activity, with numbers rising from 410 in 2024 to 2,407 in 2025.

In the Tri-Cities, most of the beetles were caught in the Pasco area, although 10 were trapped in Kennewick.

GOLD FAMILY FARM PURCHASES SCHOLLS FARM & NURSERY

Gold Family Farms (Hillsboro, Oregon) completed its purchase of Scholls Farm & Nursery (Hillsboro) in November 2025 and has re-opened it as Gold Family Farms & Landscape Outlet.

“This is a new venture for us, as Gold Family Farms has operated exclusively as a wholesale nursery for many decades,” said Mary Gallegos, Gold Family Farms executive vice president and board secretary. “While we were not actively pursuing a retail business, an opportunity presented itself to establish a retail outlet open to the public at a site that aligned well with our operations and values.”

“We were immediately impressed by the expertise and skill of the small propagation team at this location, as well as

the site’s unique positioning — centrally located among our growing operations in the area. Recognizing both the talent of the team and the strategic value of the location, we saw an opportunity to create a public-facing retail garden center that would be both distinctive and deeply connected to our production roots,” Gallegos said.

“As a large-scale wholesale nursery, we produce many varieties in high volumes and, like others in our industry, occasionally have overstocks, park-grade material, and surplus inventory. By shifting the production of shared, high-volume varieties back to our primary growing operations, this smaller team can focus on specialty plants and unique offerings. These ‘hidden gems’ will not only benefit the local community but will also be of interest to some of our wholesale customers.”

“Through this outlet, we aim to offer retail access to landscape-quality plants — both in quantity and variety — at wholesale-level pricing for professional landscapers and DIY customers alike,” Gallegos said. “Offerings will include discounted overstocks, limited-quantity specials, park-grade material, and the specialty items this team produces so well.”

NORTHWEST LAWMAKERS SUPPORT AGRITOURISM EFFORTS

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Oregon) wants to see agritourism grow and develop, so he’s teamed up with U.S. Sen. Ted Budd (R-North Carolina) to

introduce the bipartisan Accelerating the Growth of Rural Innovation and Tourism Opportunities to Uphold Rural Industries and Sustainable Marketplaces Act (Agritourism Act), according to the Pacific Northwest Ag Network, an agricultural news website. The bill is also co-sponsored by U.S. Sens. Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon) and Patty Murray (D-Washington).

The senators say the legislation will designate a senior official at USDA as the federal agritourism advisor. This role would coordinate with stakeholders and other federal agencies to promote the growth of family-owned farms and advise the secretary of agriculture on this essential industry, such as loans, grants, broadband and educational programs. Oregon State University found that each Oregon county has at least one farm participating in agritourism. In North Carolina alone, agritourism is nearly a \$1 billion industry.

ODA APPOINTS NURSERY RESEARCH AND REGULATORY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Oregon Department of Agriculture Director Lisa Charpilloz Hanson has appointed members to the Nursery Research and Regulatory Advisory Committee. The seven-member committee advises and counsels the ODA in the administration of Oregon's nursery laws and regulations and reviews the nursery inspection program. The members serve three-year staggered terms.

The members: Ross Dumdi (**Bailey Nurseries Inc.**); Ryan Contreras, Ph.D. (OSU); Peter Brentano (**Brentano's Tree Farm**); Yongjian Chang (**North American Plants**); David Webber (**Highland Meadow Nursery**); Asa Skinner (Tillamook Estuaries Partnership); and Leigh Geschwill (**F&B Farms and Nursery**).

OREGON LEGISLATURE TO REVISIT FARM STAND RULES

Lawmakers will likely be tasked with clearing up Oregon's farm stand rules after regulatory negotiations over the matter went off the rails last year, reported the *Capital Press* agricultural newspaper (Salem, Oregon).

Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek said she expects farm stand legislation to be introduced in early 2026 that will "clarify this for local government where there's not a lot of clarity right now." Kotek suspended the rulemaking process for farm stand regulations in July after a social media uproar broke out over the direction the discussions were taking.

Critics claimed the proposed regulations would be so burdensome as to drive farm stand operators out of business, while farmland preservation advocates argued >>

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Northwest News

the controversy was largely sparked by misinformation. Kotek now says she's "optimistic" that both sides will be able to agree on legislation next year that will resolve the uncertainties over what activities are permissible at farm stands. The comprehensive nature of rule-making process "might have created more questions than we needed to have answered," steering the debate back toward the statehouse, Kotek said during a recent roundtable interview with reporters.

Read more at TinyURL.com/ORFarmStandRules.

APPLICATIONS NOW OPEN FOR HORTICULTURAL SCHOLARSHIPS

Do you know a future nursery or landscape pro? The Oregon Nurseries Foundation (ONF) each year awards over \$35,000 through 21 scholarships to students pursuing careers in ornamental horticulture and related fields. The scholarships are sponsored by individuals and OAN chapters to invest in the next generation of green industry professionals.

Who's eligible? High school, college, or graduate students preparing for careers in the nursery or landscape industry. With one application, students will be considered for multiple scholarships, and past recipients are encouraged to reapply!

Applications are due by April 15. For more information, go to OAN.org/ONF.

INTERNATIONAL PLANT TRIALING CONFERENCE TO RETURN IN 2028

Based on the success of the 2025 International Plant Trialing Conference, All-America Selections and the National Garden Bureau announced that the next International Plant Trialing Conference will be held in three years, in 2028. Previously the event has been held every 5–10 years.

The three-day event, held in Bloomington, Minnesota, in October 2025, drew more than 160 plant trialing experts from four countries, with representation from breeders, brokers,



Centennial Ruby™, a radiant new hydrangea, commemorates Monrovia Nursery Company's centennial. PHOTO COURTESY OF MONROVIA NURSERY COMPANY

growers, academics and public gardens across North America. The location also allowed attendees to visit active trials at Bailey Nurseries and the University of Minnesota.

Announcements

MONROVIA MARKS 100 YEARS WITH SPECIAL HYDRANGEA

The new year marks a century of horticultural excellence for **Monrovia Nursery Company** (Dayton, Oregon) and one of the ways it's commemorating the special occasion is with the release of Centennial Ruby™ (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Hokocentennial' PPAF), a radiant new hydrangea.

This unique new variety features deep ruby-red blooms that darken as they mature to create a dramatic, color-shifting display.

Available as a limited edition in 2026, Centennial Ruby Hydrangea is the sparkling gem of the company's 100th anniversary season. The first 5,000 plants will include a special tag, each with a limited-edition number. With a limited quantity of plants available, it is sure to become a collector's item.

"Centennial Ruby is the plant everyone will want in their garden," said Katie

Tamony, chief marketing officer and trend spotter for Monrovia. "Bold, romantic tones are on trend this season and this hydrangea delivers the dramatic red we've been waiting for. It's the perfect plant for containers, garden beds and cut flowers."

TERRA NOVA RECOGNIZED AT TWO NATIONAL PLANT TRIALS

Terra Nova Nurseries (Canby, Oregon), a global leader in plant breeding technology, has been recognized for a selection of best-of-breeding varieties at the 2025 Penn State University Flower Trials and the University of Tennessee Gardens.

Penn State: *Echinacea* REVELATION® 'Coral', *Echinacea* PRINCESS™ 'Bride' and *Heuchera* 'Changeling' won Best of Show and Best of Species awards in the sun category. In the shade category, *Anemone* HARLEQUIN™ 'Cameo', *Anemone* PUFF® 'Pink', and *Pulmonaria* NOVA® 'Cobalt' were honored with Best of Species and Director's Select awards.

University of Tennessee Gardens: *Heuchera* 'Changeling' was again named Best in Show and *Agastache* 'Pink Pearl' was honored as a Customer Favorite and ranked among the most frequently requested plants at the trial gardens.



What sets *Coleus Lime Edge* apart is its unique texture and form. Its deeply lobed leaves create a soft, airy look, contrasting with the broad, flat foliage of standard coleus.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GARDENGENETICS

COLEUS LIME EDGE NAMED FLOWER OF THE YEAR IN JAPAN

Coleus Lime Edge (marketed internationally as Skeletal 'G20057' PP36481) has been named the 2025–26 Flower of the Year in Japan, one of the country's most prestigious horticultural honors, according to marketing firm **Upshoot LLC**. The award is presented by the Japan Flower Selection Association following an intensive, multi-stage trialing and evaluation process that recognizes standout plant varieties for performance, innovation, and market appeal.

Bred by Rick Grazzini of GardenGenetics, Lime Edge was introduced to global markets through a coordinated international launch led by Kientzler GmbH and Kientzler North America, Kernock Park Plants (UK), Hayloft Plants (UK), and Plants for Europe.

What sets Lime Edge apart is its unique texture and form. Its deeply lobed leaves create a soft, airy look, contrasting with the broad, flat foliage of standard coleus.

MCHUTCHISON NAMES NEW WESTERN REGIONAL SALES MANAGER

David Clark has been named Western regional sales manager by **McHutchison**, a horticultural distributor serving North American greenhouse and nursery markets.

Clark joined McHutchison in 2022 as sales representative for Southern California. He served key roles in his family's retail and wholesale floral busi- >>

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David Clark

nesses as well as senior leadership positions across several organizations in the horticulture industry prior to his arrival at McHutchison.

Clark will oversee sales strategy, team leadership and regional growth initiatives across the Western U.S.

In memoriam

WILBUR BLUHM

The Oregon Association of Nurseries is saddened to report that Honorary Life member Wilbur LeRoy Bluhm passed away on September 25, 2025 while in hospice after suffering a debilitating stroke 18 months earlier. He was 98.



David Clark

He was born January 29, 1927 in Seward, Nebraska. Bluhm grew up in Nebraska, and graduated in 1947 as a proud alumnus of the University of Nebraska. After college he met Mary Louise Brunzell, and they married in August of 1953. He spent several years in Nebraska after college, and four years in the Air Force in Illinois, before he and Mary moved to Salem, Oregon in 1957.

After moving to Oregon, a daughter Ann, and two sons Bob and Jim were born. In Salem, Bluhm worked for the Oregon State University Extension Service, becoming Marion County staff chairman and specializing in ornamental horticulture, before retiring after 27 years of service.

After he retired, Bluhm stayed busy in the horticulture field through consulting and his involvement with professional organizations locally and worldwide. ©



Shades of red

Consumer fascination with hues of red, pink and burgundy is fueling a growing tropical plant trend

BY EMILY HOARD

Tropical plants with red leaves or flowers have been popular for a long time, but consumer fascination shows no signs of waning. In fact, the trend has now broadened to include plants with hues of pink and burgundy.

Mackenzie Allaert, office manager and HR director at wholesale grower **Youngblood Nursery Inc.** in Salem, Oregon, said she's seen a rise in plants with red, pink and burgundy tones. They are very good holiday plants for Valentine's Day, Mother's Day and Christmas.

But beyond holidays, she said, growers are



Shades of red

increasingly producing new varieties with pink and red tones, making them more accessible in the retail market and therefore more popular.

Color sells

Ann Patterson, houseplant buyer at two-location retailer **Portland Nursery** (Portland, Oregon), said just like in any retail situation, color sells.

“Pink and red variegated plants can look really marvelous,” Patterson said. “They can pop in a group of plants so I can see why they’re popular.”

“Who doesn’t love a pink plant?,” said Michelle Bundy, the foliage lead at wholesale grower Casa Flora in Dallas, Texas. “As the foliage lead for Casa Flora, I have seen the increase in sales among our pink and purple plants and the constant desire for anything with a pink leaf.”

Variation

Variiegated plants have been popular for a long time, as a theme that is important in the American market, said Andrej Suske, owner of **Cascade Tropicals** in Snohomish, Washington.

“In general, we see the yellow and white variegation as the most popular and I haven’t really seen that change,” Suske said. “If you can add some red or pink tones to a white or yellow variegation, that is definitely something that is popular, but it’s also a bit more rare to see that.”

He added that plants that have purple or red leaves are not rare at all so they’re not as popular unless they have clear lines of white or pink in the leaves.

“But anything that makes a leaf more interesting is a good thing,” Suske said. “Ultimately we need to have everything so the consumer can see many things and then they’re going to pick something that is more shiny or more different than most of it.”

How it started

Suske said around 2010, young people started waking up to houseplants.

“It was very clear that houseplants gained traction around 2010, and it was especially young people buying them, which was not recognized by many



Pteris Candy Stripe. PHOTO COURTESY OF CASA FLORA



Begonia 'Cracklin Rosie'. PHOTO COURTESY OF YOUNGBLOOD NURSERY

people in our industry because we were so focused on old consumers — that old lady who was thought to be a ‘garden center person,’” Suske said. “And these younger people from 25–40, they always wanted something that looked different, and they shopped by seeing something on Facebook and Instagram so they had a different way that they chose plants.”

One of the best-known pink plants is *Philodendron* ‘Pink Princess’.

“The ‘Pink Princess’ was one of the very early extremely popular plants before COVID,” Suske said. “In 2019, one plant would be sold for \$500 or \$1000, very high prices.”

By the pandemic in 2020, people were spending more time at home and had money to spend, and Patterson said the ‘Pink Princess’ was the big thing at the time.

“It was expensive and I had them in a locked box so they wouldn’t disappear,” Patterson said.

Bundy also said this particular green vine streaked with pink was where it all began.

“‘Pink Princess’ has been around for many years, but it wasn’t until the tissue culture labs got a hold of it that it became the widespread phenomenon it is,” Bundy said.

Tissue culture produces plants at a faster rate, bringing more of these popular plants to market.

Patterson said these once sought-after expensive *Philodendrons* are now on sale for \$12.99 at Portland Nursery.

“A longtime grower said tissue culture ruins everything,” Patterson said. “Tissue culture has changed a lot and he can’t compete with the quantities that can be produced with tissue culture.”

But Suske said this quantity also revealed the variegation’s instability.

“‘Pink Princess’ had the problem of reverting at a young age, so there was not any variegation left in 50% of the plants after a relatively short time,” Suske said.

He said the original ‘Pink Princess’ has been replaced with the *Philodendron* ‘Pink Princess Marble’, a variety that has more stability in keeping its variegation over time.

Patterson said she walked through >>



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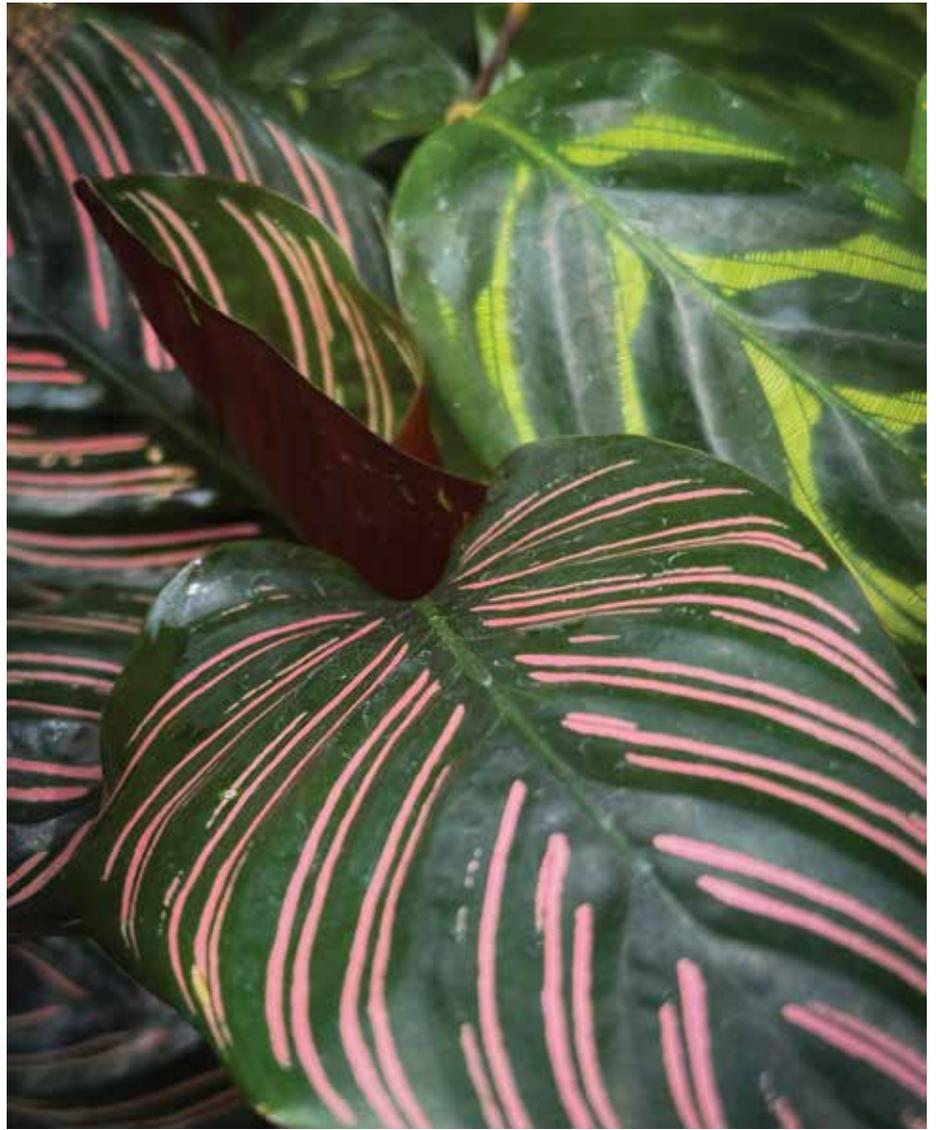
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From top: *Fittonia albivinis* 'Zalm Ruby Lime', *Tradescantia* 'Zebrina Red', *Begonia brevirimosa* 'Exotica' and *Begonia bipinnatifida*. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CASCADE TROPICALS



Calathea ornata. PHOTO COURTESY OF PORTLAND NURSERY



Philodendron 'Red Heart'. PHOTO COURTESY OF YOUNGBLOOD NURSERY

a greenhouse and found 15 examples of tropical plants with red or pink tones without trying. She said there are many other *Philodendrons* that have red variegation, as well as several *Begonia*.

“The *Ficus elastica* ‘Ruby’ is easy to grow,” Patterson said. “And there’s the trailing inch plant *Tradescantia*, and a lot of others like *Calathea* and *Hypoestes phyllostachya* ‘Polka Dot,’” Patterson said.

Allaert also named a few examples, including the *Philodendron* ‘Red Heart,’ *Aglaonema* ‘Siam Aura,’ *Philodendron* ‘Strawberry Shake,’ *Begonia* ‘Cracklin Rosie,’ and *Ludisa discolor* ‘Sea Turtle’.

Suske said the *Tradescantia albiflora* ‘Nanouk’ is one of the best examples of why red and pink is very popular.

“It’s easy to grow and hard to kill, and not very expensive,” Suske said. “It’s a good entry plant for those getting into houseplants and hopefully they will buy others

like the *Begonia exotica*, which is also not as expensive and it’s easy to grow.”

He said one of his favorite colorful succulents is *Portulacaria afra* ‘Mediopicta’. A new *Philodendron* being developed in tissue culture is the ‘Pink Bikini’.

Bundy said from *Calathea* to *Aglaonema*, more pink varieties continue to be brought to market.

“Collectors online go wild when they have a plant that pops out a rouge pink leaf,” Bundy said.

Looking ahead

Bundy said she sees the trend of tropical plants with red and pink hues continuing, especially as they are becoming more affordable and less exclusive, like with the ‘Pink Princess’.

“As far as new plants being developed, I’d look towards the rare sports that are becoming more stable,” Bundy said.

Patterson said growers keep selecting for new varieties. “Growers and collectors are always looking for a new plant that looks different, and then they start propagating that and it’s the next big thing,” Patterson said. “I hope growers are looking for healthy, robust plants with healthy variegation instead of one with too much white or yellow variegation that weakens the plants because they have less chlorophyll.”

Allaert said she thinks the trend will always be sought after but might slow down as the next best thing comes out.

“Especially with tissue culture being such a prominent source of plants for producers, there will be plenty of new varieties coming out,” Allaert said.

Suske said he thinks social media will continue to drive trends too, as it did for the pink and red variegated plants.

“If there are cool pictures that get enough traction, people are going to >>

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Cissus javana
Euphorbia trigona 'Rubra'
Ficus elastica 'Ruby'
Maranta leuc. erythronera
Musa nono 'Pink'
Bromeliad neoregelia
Peperomia caperata 'Buenos Aires'
Peperomia caperata 'Cayenne'
Philodendron 'Cherry Red'
Philodendron 'Pink Bikini'
Philodendron 'Pink Princess Marble'
Philodendron rubri 'El Choco Red'
Portulacaria afra 'Medio-Picta'
Pteris aspericaulis 'Tricolor'
Selaginella erythropus 'Sanguinea'

FAVORITES OF MICHELLE BUNDY (CASA FLORA)

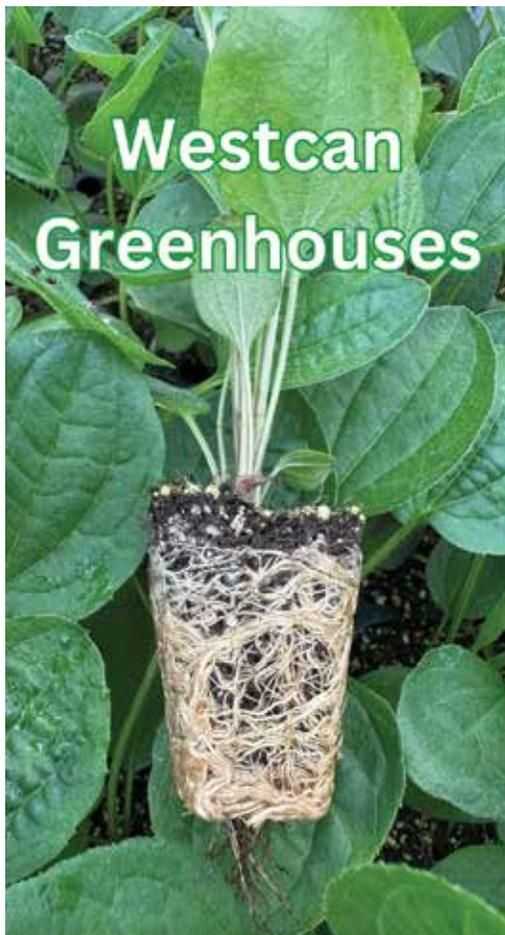
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Geogenanthus poeppigii
Philodendron 'Pink Princess Marble'
Alocasia 'Red Secret'
Philodendron 'Cherry Red'
Philodendron 'Choco Red'
Calathea 'Purple Rose'
Calathea 'Rosy'
Calathea 'Peacock'
Calathea 'Pinstripe'
Calathea 'Rattlesnake'
Syngonium 'Neon'
Syngonium 'Pink Perfection'
Alocasia brancifolia 'Pink Passion'
Pteris asperaulis 'Tricolor' Candy
 Striped Brake Fern
Adiantum hispidulum Rosy
 Maidenhair
Blechnum Brasiliense Brazilian Tree
 Fern

gravitate to them. And as soon as those are replaced by something else, they will move on to that," Suske said.

Suske said he thinks variegation will always be popular. "I think what will happen is that now that more breeding is happening in houseplants — because breeders see there's money there — there's a big market," Suske said. "We will likely see more plants that have variegation and maybe more plants that have white and pink variegation on the same leaf."

He said if a plant breeder developed a new *Monstera* with pink variegation, it would be very successful because people look for the mix of pink and green on one leaf. ☺

Emily Hoard is an Oregon-based freelance journalist covering business, environmental and agricultural news. She has a background in community reporting and a master's degree in multimedia journalism. You can reach her at Hoarde123@Gmail.com



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Greenhouses that go

Automation helps greenhouse growers promote quality and efficiency



Above: An automatic roof washer known as a Top Cleaner from the Dutch company Van Der Waay runs laps back and forth atop Oregon Flowers' greenhouses to keep them clean. Below: A "top trimmer" machine from GK Machine uniformly trims any stems left in soil crates after the mature flowers are cut. PHOTOS COURTESY OF OREGON FLOWERS

BY JON BELL

For Tyler Meskers, owner of **Oregon Flowers**, greenhouses are key to growing the colorful lilies, tulips and other cut flowers that the company has become known for since his parents founded it in Aurora, Oregon, in 1985. And it's not just because their 10 acres of greenhouses create optimal growing conditions; it's also because they provide something that Mother Nature can't — multiple growing seasons each year.

That means Oregon Flowers can meet the high points of demand throughout the entire year with fresh flowers no matter the season, from Thanksgiving and Christmas to the rushes at Valentine's and Easter, on into Mother's Day and then the relatively calm weddings and celebrations of early summer.

"In a greenhouse, we can mimic the late spring season with grow lights and heating, so we can force our plants over a three-month period," Meskers said. "Out in the fields, you only have one chance throughout a 12-month period. We pretty much have four cycles a year in our green-

GREENHOUSE OF THE FUTURE

Canopii takes a leap towards autonomous greenhouse production. See Page 24

houses, sometimes five, so it's like you can run five seasons instead of just one being outside. That's really how we get the numbers to work."

Of course, greenhouses are nothing new. The first attempts at growing indoors likely date back to ancient Rome if not earlier; later advances happened in Korea during the 15th century. The first practical modern greenhouse was built in Holland in the 1800s, and similar structures developed throughout the remainder of the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe, North America and beyond.

And while greenhouse designs continue to evolve to improve efficiency and growing conditions, growers in more recent times have turned to another factor to help their glass (or plastic) houses grow the best they can: automation.

From automated climate controls, lighting and irrigation to autonomous



vehicles and robots that can cut flowers, stack crates and mix soil, automation is helping nursery growers improve quality, efficiency and consistency. It's been happening — and helping — for years. And even though there is concern that automation might be displacing workers, many nursery owners say automating tasks frees up their employees for much more >>

Greenhouses that go

meaningful and important work.

“We are always looking at automation,” Meskers said, “but that’s not to necessarily remove employees, but to expand our production and improve our quality while we keep our labor force the same.”

The basics

Automating and mechanizing greenhouses — and the work that goes on inside them — has been happening for years. These days, it’s not uncommon for greenhouses to have sidewalls that automatically raise and lower depending on the weather and other conditions. Many also have programmable fans that create the horizontal airflow that’s key to creating an ideal growing environment.

It’s no longer cutting edge, but rather best practice, to have temperature, irrigation, fertilization and other factors programmed and controlled digitally, making it easier to create the kind of consistent conditions that result in higher-quality crops.

“Greenhouse automation systems enhance plant quality, uniformity and operational efficiency by providing precise control over the cultivation environment,” said Derrick Bratton, head of greenhouse sales for **GK Machine**, a manufacturer of agricultural equipment and greenhouses that is based in Donald, Oregon. “These systems regulate key variables such as temperature, humidity, irrigation and fertilization, creating stable conditions for consistent crop development.”

Future focus

And then there are other innovations that have made their way into greenhouses to help growers in different ways.

Pablo Costa is the director of operations for Van Belle Finished Plants, part of the **Van Belle Nursery** in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada. They grow a broad range of plants, from tropicals and succulents to perennials and grasses, for sale to retail shops and high-volume garden centers.

Costa said the company has been investing in automation for its greenhouse operations annually. “My starting point is always looking at automation equip-



Workers at Van Belle receive a briefing on an autonomous Burro, which can be used to move racks and plants. PHOTO COURTESY OF VAN BELLE NURSERY

ment that is replacing repetitive or tedious work,” he said. “Equipment that has a good ROI (return on investment) and saves time in terms of hours of labor or unvalued labor activity.”

For Van Belle Finished Plants, that’s meant investing in automated wrapping machines, which automatically wrap containers in plastic to secure them for shipping. Van Belle has also purchased an automatic soil machine that fills hoppers with soil, a job that used to be handled by an employee in a Bobcat.

In addition, the nursery now has two autonomous vehicles called Burros, which can be used to move racks, plants and other goods around the property — work that used to take a driver and a vehicle.

At Oregon Flowers, crews use a “top trimmer” machine from GK Machine, which uniformly trims any stems left in soil crates after the mature flowers are cut. That way, the crates can be stacked evenly by a robotic machine. Before, workers would tend to this task with knives, something that didn’t always result in uniform cuts. It was also work that would often provide overtime hours for employees — a perk that’s gotten more challenging for nurseries to offer as rules have changed and made overtime pay more costly.

They also employ an automatic roof washer known as a Top Cleaner from the Dutch company Van Der Waay, which runs laps back and forth atop Oregon Flowers’ greenhouses to keep them clean. In addition, Oregon Flowers has a robotic mobile stacking unit built by Terra International that collects crates from the greenhouse and places them onto pallets, which can then be transported by forklift.

There’s also a mobile stacking unit from Dutch company Porveer that takes out old crates and brings in freshly planted ones, work that used to require manual labor.

Other innovations making their way into greenhouses include systems for pest and disease management which, according to Bratton, can apply treatments automatically in precise, pre-calculated amounts, helping to mitigate crop loss and reduce the need for widespread chemical applications. Advanced sensors and software utilizing AI can also monitor environmental variables like temperature, humidity and lighting and make real-time adjustments to maintain ideal conditions.

“By implementing these automations, greenhouse growers can achieve greater operational efficiency, reduce manual labor and produce a more consistent, high-quality product,” Bratton said. Other benefits of automation include more efficient use of resources — i.e. saving electricity, not over-watering, etc ... — optimizing available workers, shifting to year-round production and being able to operate more sustainably.

Meskers said the biggest difference he notices with automation is an increase in quality and consistency.

“Our quality is much more consistent,” he said. “If you have people doing something by hand, each person is doing it slightly different. If you have a piece of equipment doing it, your product is much more consistent. I think there’s a big advantage to that.”

Reality check

Despite all its benefits, automation in greenhouses doesn’t come without chal-

lenges. For starters, there's the up-front cost, which can be substantial. Individual pieces of equipment come with their own costs, but a fully automated facility — including structure, systems for climate control, lighting and irrigation, automated sensors and software — can range between \$100 to \$150 per square foot, according to Bratton.

Cost examples for such a facility might include \$75,000–150,000 for climate control systems, \$60,000–120,000 for sensors and controls and \$30,000–50,000 for irrigation and fertigation systems.

While the initial cost can be steep, Bratton said many growers see a return on their investment within three to five years.

There's also training that comes with new technology, not to mention maintenance and upkeep. However, even maintenance has taken a leap forward these days when it comes to automation. Meskers

said if there's ever an issue with some of the Dutch equipment Oregon Flowers uses, technicians from Europe can patch in and troubleshoot or conduct maintenance from afar at night when in-person employees aren't working.

"It's definitely a different way of farming," he said. "You used to be able to go fix something with a screwdriver and a hammer. Now you go to your laptop to figure out the issue."

Automating a facility that's already up and running can be a trickier too. At Van Belle, Costa said they've had to spend time mapping the greenhouses and identifying doors and obstacles so that the autonomous vehicles can be programmed to move smoothly about the property. In some instances, that's meant making changes to the layout.

"I think you kind of wish you could start (automating) from scratch, but

instead you have to modify your structure or make other changes to accommodate it," he said. "That can be a challenge."

There's also the idea that automating greenhouses means there's less of a need for real-life workers. But Costa and others say that's not how it works. When a mundane task can be automated, that worker can be reallocated to a different, more meaningful position — and more can be done with the same amount of people.

"As the company grows and we produce more plants, we're not hiring more people," he said. "We're using the same number of people but producing more — and the work's more satisfying too." ☺

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.



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Canopii's fully automated greenhouse holds promise for all kinds of growers

BY JON BELL

As if robotic crate stackers, automatic sidewalls and autonomous vehicles haven't innovated greenhouse production enough, a small startup in Hubbard, Oregon, is poised to take greenhouse automation and innovation to a whole new level.

Founded by mechanical engineer David Ashton in 2021, Canopii Inc. has created a fully automated hydroponic greenhouse that requires little to no manual labor. Inside the 2,500-square-foot, 30-foot-tall greenhouse, almost every task, from seeding, watering, transplanting, crop monitoring, harvesting and sorting has been automated. The only time a human has to step in is every few weeks to replenish nutrients and seeds, and keep up on pest control.

At present, the Canopii "farm," as the company refers to its greenhouses, is geared largely for leafy greens like lettuce and bok choy, as well as herbs. Most varieties grow from seed to harvest in about 30 days, and a single farm is capable of producing the equivalent of about three acres of land or about 30,000 pounds of greens. The company's first working prototype was constructed on land adjacent to **GK Machine**, a well-known greenhouse and agricultural equipment manufacturer in Donald, Oregon that also produces components for Canopii.

According to Ryan Tovey, business development manager for Canopii, the original concept of the system was driven by Ashton's affinity for the idea of food sovereignty, whereby people have access to not only healthy, sustainably produced food, but also the means to produce and distribute it.

"I think he sort of fell in love with that intersection of making food and engi-



Canopii Inc. has created a fully automated hydroponic greenhouse that requires little to no manual labor. PHOTO COURTESY OF CANOPII

neering," Tovey said. "He knew that it could be difficult for farmers when it comes to seasonality and labor, as well as some other supply chain pressures, so his idea was to come up with a way to help them."

Since its founding, the company has received funding from the National Science Foundation and other investors to bring the system to fruition. They're now focused on building their first commercialized, fully functioning greenhouse, likely somewhere in Portland where a community would support and be able to access locally grown greens year-round. Because one greenhouse can produce so much, Tovey said Canopii is also looking to potentially partner with a retailer like Market of Choice, who could sell Canopii greens as some of the freshest around.

"I think what gets me so excited about it, just from an overall feeling-good-about-the-work-you're-doing, standpoint, is the promise to actually bring hyper-local produce super close to the consumer," Tovey said. "It's something you just don't

see very often. It's so hard to get really local, year-round produce, but this is a promise is to do just that. You're going to get something that was grown and harvested outside your supermarket the day before you go and buy it."

Although the Canopii system is currently only aimed at leafy greens, the company does have aspirations to branch out into other sectors, including the nursery industry. That would likely take some modification of the systems, and growers might also have to consider diversifying their crops with options that could be grown year-round, but the potential, according to Tovey is real.

"We've had a good amount of nursery folks out here to look at it," he said. "We're looking for innovative thinkers who have ideas on how this could be used for them year-round. We'd love their input. It's kind of this exciting blank canvas. We know we've got something special, and we know we can help."

Find out more at Canopii.us ©



Accessibility in mind

Terra Gardens owner's gesture for his mother opens the door to other wheelchair-bound gardening enthusiasts

Terra Gardens owner Dan Estacio was just trying to make his Salem, Oregon, nursery accessible for his wheelchair-bound mother, Rudeen Estacio (below), when he renovated it. Now it's a destination for many wheelchair-bound gardening enthusiasts. PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERRA GARDENS

BY MITCH LIES

Dan Estacio, owner of **Terra Gardens Nursery & Bark** in Salem, Oregon wasn't looking to gain notoriety for being ADA accessible when he renovated his nursery five years ago. He was just trying to make the facility accessible to his wheelchair-bound mother. That he did make it ADA accessible, however, hasn't hurt his business.

Terra Gardens, in fact, is now a destination for many wheelchair-bound gardening enthusiasts, something Estacio started taking pride in the moment he realized how influential it was to open an ADA, or Americans with Disabilities Act, accessible garden center.

"It suddenly gave people access to something that they didn't have, and it opened up my understanding of how many of those folks love to go to a garden center but were resigned to go to a box store. And they were just thrilled.

"It is a nice feeling to be able to do this," Estacio said.



Just for Mom

Estacio said it was particularly rewarding to open up his nursery to his mother, who instilled in him a love of plants and who passed away at the age of 81 in January 2023. For many of her later years, he said, she was unable to get around the old version of Terra Gardens.

"She couldn't shop at our facility, because our entire facility was gravel and there was no way she could get around

it," Estacio said. "She was kind of confined to a couple of small areas when she came here.

"We even tried an electric scooter, and it could get her to some areas, but not all of it," he said.

When in 2020 Estacio set out to renovate the facility, he approached the builders and told them his intent. That, he said, was the first time he realized he was making it ADA accessible.

"They were like 'ADA? Yes, we can do that.' And I was like, 'Okay, well, ADA.' And I didn't think it would matter to anybody other than my mom, who actually got to shop here several times before she passed away and she was delighted with it," Estacio said.

Broader impact

His realization that he had accomplished something considerable struck him in the spring of 2021. On a Saturday, two weeks after Estacio opened the new facility, he noticed several wheelchair-bound customers milling about the plants at the nursery. >>

Accessibility in mind



The facility has been laid out so that there are no dead ends where a wheelchair would get stuck turning around and all doors open automatically. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA GARDENS

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The facility has aisles at least six feet wide and with main aisles at a width of 12 feet, so two people in wheelchairs could pass each other without difficulty. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA GARDENS

His first thought was that a local retirement center had bused in some residents.

After asking around, however, he realized the wheelchair-bound customers didn't know one another and were from different parts of the state.

Eventually Estacio learned from a wheelchair-bound customer from Medford that a feature story on the nursery had been published on the Disability Rights Oregon website. In the article, it was highlighted that the nursery was ADA accessible.

"I didn't even know there was such a website that you could go to that might make a recommendation like that," Estacio said.

Later, he learned that the story was written by a gentleman who had shopped at Terra Gardens for years before he became wheelchair bound. The gentleman told Estacio that he noticed while driving by one day that the new facility looked to be ADA accessible.

Estacio asked the gentleman, whose name he can't remember, if there was anything else he could do to make it more accessible to wheelchair-bound customers, and was told he could make the bathroom a little more accessible, and so did that, too.

Also at the gentleman's advice, the nursery added a second ramp to the entrance so people in wheelchairs could access the nursery without having to drive through the parking lot on their wheelchairs.

"My intent was to make it accessible to my mom, but in the long run, I think a lot of people's moms and dads ended up hav-

ing access to it, as well and kids and cousins that never did before," Estacio said.

Specifications for adequate access

Estacio designed the facility with aisles at least six feet wide and with main aisles at a width of 12 feet, so two people in wheelchairs could pass each other without difficulty. He made sure there were no dead ends, where a wheelchair would have difficulty turning around. All doors open automatically.

The nursery also carries a wide assortment of plastic pots that are easier for wheelchair-bound garden enthusiasts to work with. "We sell quite a few of the lighter weight, big, plastic pots," he said.

"Gardening tends to lean heavily on people who are healthy," Estacio said. "And yet you have a lot of people out there, whether young or old, who don't have the physical ability to do it, but they would really like to. So we like to make that possible."

Estacio's mom, Elizabeth (Rudeen) Estacio, incidentally, was no slouch when it came to gardening. She became quite adept at Bonsai techniques, Estacio said, a skill she learned while in the Bay Area. At one point, Estacio noted, Rudeen actually met and spent some time with John Naka, who at the time was president of the California Bonsai Association and who later became internationally renowned among Bonsai enthusiasts.

Estacio also noted that his mother and father, Albert Estacio, helped him purchase the nursery in 2004. And both parents worked for him at the nursery >>

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Terra Gardens owners Dan Estancia and his wife Pam. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA GARDENS

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for several years, with Rudeen teaching Bonsai classes for a spell.

“They jumped in and helped me get started,” he said.

Eventually, Estacio said he began to realize Rudeen’s ability to enjoy gardening was waning significantly. “And so, I wanted to have a facility that she could enjoy towards the end of her life.”

Albert, who is still alive, still enjoys coming to the facility, Estacio added. “He has Alzheimer’s, but he is still able to enjoy his visits here.”

Estacio said he hesitates to characterize the design of his nursery as a community service. But, he said, the fact that he has been able to open up a nursery to people who normally would have a hard time gardening means a lot to him. And, he noted, the nursery still gets a regular influx of people in wheelchairs.

“A lot of that tends to be word-of-mouth now,” he said. “Over time, the word has got out that it’s a safe place to get around.” ©

Mitch Lies is a freelance writer covering agricultural issues based in Salem Oregon. He can be reached at MitchLies@Comcast.net.

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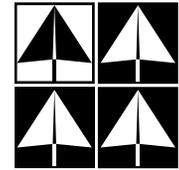
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GROWING KNOWLEDGE

Series content is coordinated by Dr. Lloyd Nackley, associate professor of nursery production and greenhouse management at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon.

Lighting the way for houseplants

Oregon grows plants well – but winter light is limiting

BY LLOYD NACKLEY, CLINT TAYLOR AND DALYN MCCAULEY

Oregon is one of the best places in the country to grow plants. Mild temperatures, abundant water, long growing traditions, and a skilled workforce have made our state a national leader in nursery and greenhouse production.

But winter production in Oregon has a familiar dark side: month after month where sunshine is in short supply.

Everyone knows Oregon is wet. What's easier to overlook is how persistent fall and winter cloud cover sharply reduces the amount of usable light reaching crops, even in well-designed greenhouses. It's miserable for sun lovers, and for growers trying to maintain quality, consistency, and production timelines through the darker months, light can be the limiting factor.

That dark reality has pushed many greenhouse operations to consider supplemental lighting. The harder question isn't what lighting can do, but when it makes sense to invest.

How much light are your crops really getting?

Light drives photosynthesis, and photosynthesis drives growth. For greenhouse growers, one of the more useful ways to think about light is the total amount delivered over the course of a day — what we call daily light integral, or DLI.

For folks interested in DLI, the American Floral Endowment supported work by James Faust and Joanne Logan to create excellent, freely available DLI maps published in HortScience in 2018 that show how light availability shifts across the country month by month. »



PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

Greenhouse production area densely stocked with tropical foliage plants, including *Philodendron* 'Pink Princess'. Hanging baskets are used to maximize vertical space while also creating shade over crops below, illustrating the high value and intensive management typical of modern houseplant production. PHOTO BY LLOYD NACKLEY

Growing Knowledge

DLI integrates day length, cloud cover, greenhouse transmission, and shading into a single value that reflects the total photosynthetically active light delivered to a crop. The DLI is measured in $\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{d}^{-1}$ which is a way of measuring how much usable light a plant receives in a day, by counting the photons, or packets of light energy, hitting a square meter.

Research-based DLI maps show that during winter months, outdoor DLI across western Oregon often falls between 5 and 10 $\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{d}^{-1}$. Once greenhouse structure, glazing, condensation, and sun angle are accounted for, crops inside greenhouses may receive only 2–4 $\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{d}^{-1}$ for extended periods.

At those levels, many crops don't stop growing — but they slow dramatically. Development stretches out. Uniformity declines. Finishing dates become harder to predict.

Houseplants: fast-growing markets, faster-changing targets

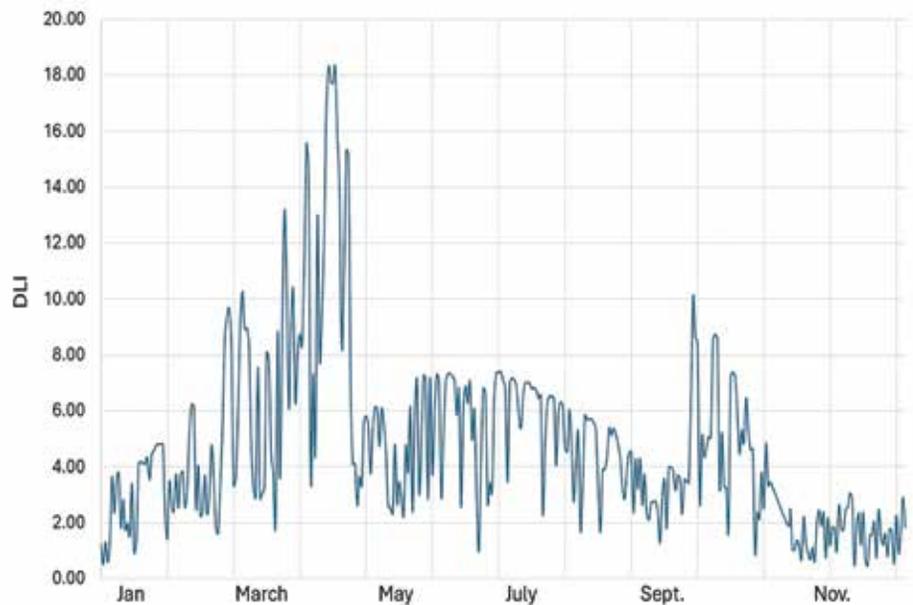
This light challenge intersects directly with one of the most dynamic segments of modern horticulture: houseplants.

Over the past decade, houseplants have surged from a niche category to a cultural phenomenon. Sales have roughly doubled, fueled by younger consumers, urban living, and a renewed interest in indoor spaces as living environments. Alongside this growth has come an explosion of books, magazines, podcasts, and social media devoted to houseplants, including influential voices based right here in Portland. We see you, @HousePlantClub @AriumBotanicals and @PistilsNursery.

For wholesale growers, this attention has been a double-edged sword.

Demand has never been higher, but trends now move at internet speed. A cultivar can command premium prices one season and become widely available just a few years later as propagation scales rapidly. The rise (and normalization) of *Monstera deliciosa* 'Thai Constellation' and *Philodendron* 'Pink Princess' are familiar examples: once rare, now far more accessible.

This isn't a failure of the market; it's the market working efficiently. But it does mean



Annual seasonal changes in daily light integral (DLI) measured in a double-walled poly hoop house in Oregon. DLI during winter months remained at or below $\sim 4 \text{ mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{d}^{-1}$, increased rapidly in spring, and declined in summer after black plastic shade cloth was installed, reducing DLI to approximately $6 \text{ mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{d}^{-1}$. FIGURE BY LLOYD NACKLEY

growers are operating in an environment where timing matters as much as quality.

From conversation to question

A few years ago, a group of us in the Nackley Lab were making the familiar drive down the road from the North Willamette Research and Extension Center to one of our nursery neighbors, **Little Prince of Oregon** (Aurora, Oregon). It's a short trip, and one we always look forward to.

Little Prince has built a reputation for great new plant selections and innovative production methods, but what really makes those visits memorable is the people. Whether we're being hosted by Mark, Alexa, or Mike, and lately running into familiar faces of recent Oregon State graduates now part of the next generation of Oregon nursery production, we end up doing what plant people do best: talking plants.

On this particular visit, the conversation centered on houseplants and their growing importance to the nursery's production portfolio. Demand was rising, new cultivars were coming online fast, and crops that once felt niche were suddenly occupying meaningful greenhouse space.

At some point, the conversation turned to a simple question: Would adding LED lighting to their heated hoop houses actually push production forward?

It sounded straightforward. It wasn't.

Why houseplants are different

Unlike established global greenhouse commodities, like tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, or even leafy greens and floriculture crops, houseplants don't come with decades of lighting recipes. For lettuce or basil, we know exactly how much light is needed to hit specific growth targets. For poinsettias or bedding plants, lighting guidelines are well worn into extension manuals and grower intuition alike.

Houseplants are different.

We know they tolerate low light. In fact, that's part of why they've become so popular in homes and apartments. They don't collapse when placed ten feet from a window, and they forgive a lot of neglect. But tolerance isn't the same as optimization.

In their natural environments, many tropical foliage plants don't spend their entire lives in deep shade. They creep. They climb. They slowly work their way up trunks and stems, inching toward brighter canopy light. That behavior tells us something important: while these plants can survive low light, they may very well thrive — and finish faster — under higher light.

And that's where the question gets interesting for growers.

What we learned about light and houseplants

When growers bring us questions like

“Would adding lighting be worth it?”, our job isn’t to guess—it’s to diagnose. At NWREC, we have tools that allow us to look directly at how plants respond to different light environments, particularly by measuring photosynthesis across a wide range of light levels.

Terms like “low,” “medium,” or “bright indirect” light work well at retail. But those categories don’t tell a grower how fast a crop will finish, how consistently it will grow, or whether additional light will actually pay off in production.

To answer that question, we brought twelve commercially important tropical foliage cultivars into a controlled environment and measured their photosynthetic response across a wide range of light levels. The group included *Philodendron*, *Monstera*, *Syngonium*, and *Goeppertia* (often still referred to as *Calathea*).

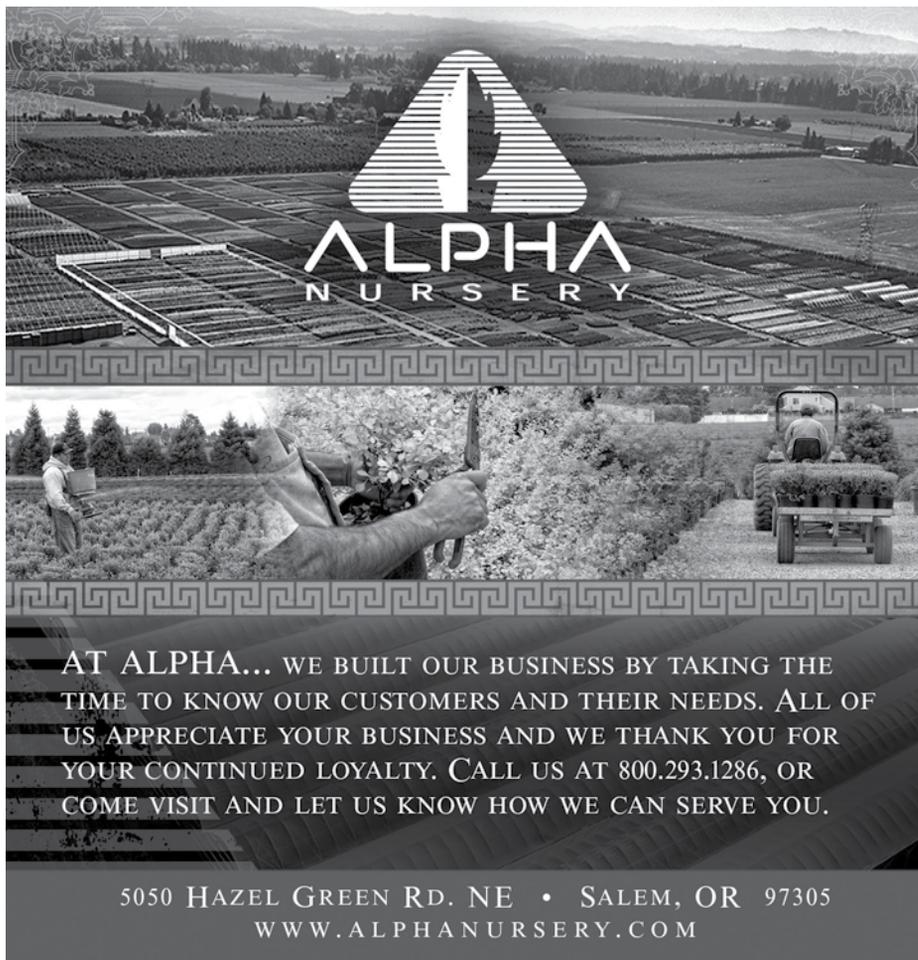
Plants were grown under uniform conditions and tested using a portable gas-exchange system, which allows us to measure how much carbon dioxide a leaf is taking up, which is a direct indicator of photosynthetic activity. Leaves were exposed to stepwise increases in light intensity, from near darkness to very bright conditions, and photosynthesis was measured at each step.

From those data, we derived three values that help explain how plants behave under different light environments:

- the light compensation point, where photosynthesis just balances respiration;
- the light saturation point, beyond which additional light no longer increases photosynthesis; and
- the light-saturated photosynthetic rate, which reflects how fast a plant can photosynthesize when light is no longer limiting.

One need not memorize those terms to understand the takeaway. What matters is how differently plants behaved.

Across the twelve cultivars, we observed substantial variation in how much light plants could use effectively. Some species reached photosynthetic saturation at relatively low light levels. Others continued to respond positively as light >>



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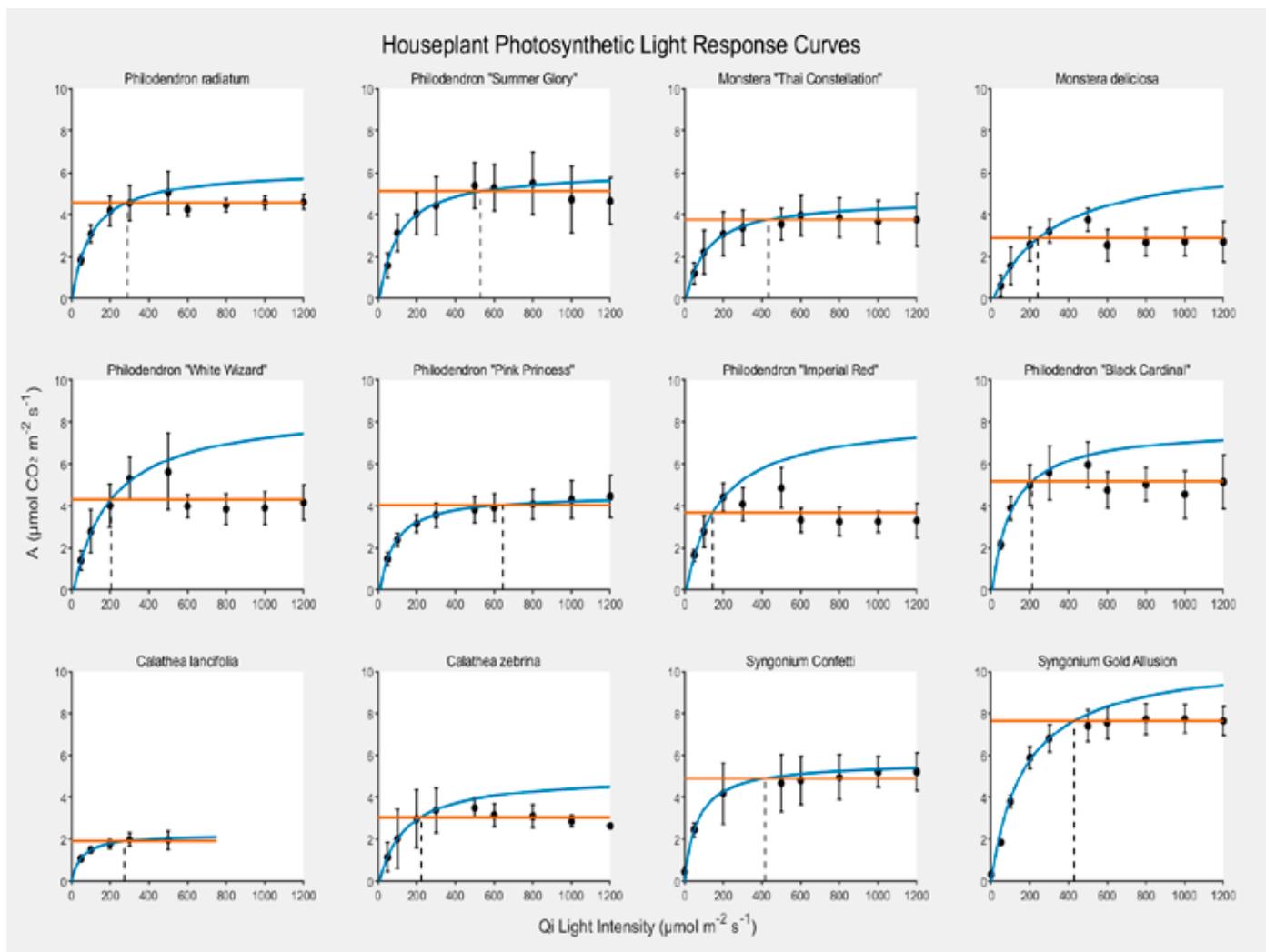
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Photosynthetic light response curves for 12 houseplant cultivars showing variation in light requirements. *Calathea* species reached photosynthetic saturation at relatively low light levels, whereas several *Philodendron* and *Syngonium* cultivars exhibited higher light saturation points and greater photosynthetic capacity. FIGURE BY CLINT TAYLOR

increased, well beyond what winter greenhouses in Oregon typically provide.

Goepertia species were the most shade-adapted. They saturated photosynthesis at lower light levels and maintained modest photosynthetic rates, reinforcing why they tolerate dim interior environments so well. From a production standpoint, this suggests that pushing light much beyond moderate levels may offer limited returns for these crops.

Philodendron and *Monstera* cultivars occupied the middle ground. They tolerated low light, but many did not saturate photosynthesis until moderate irradiance levels were reached. Darker *Philodendron* showing higher light requirements than some of the other green counterparts, helping explain why these plants often struggle to maintain quality under dim production conditions.

Syngonium stood out as the most light-responsive group. These cultivars achieved the highest photosynthetic rates of any plants we tested. In practical terms, *Syngonium* may survive under low light, but it is poorly matched to low-light production systems if speed and efficiency are the goal.

Taken together, these results reinforce an important distinction: tolerance is not the same as optimization. For several popular taxa, photosynthesis remains light-limited at intensities commonly delivered during winter production in Oregon greenhouses.

When curiosity turns into commitment

Those early conversations at Little Prince weren't happening in isolation. Similar questions were surfacing across Oregon greenhouses. Growers weren't asking whether LED lighting worked —

that much was becoming clear — but whether it worked for their crops, their systems, and their timelines.

Some operations had already crossed that bridge. Long-established greenhouse producers in Oregon, such as **Peoria Gardens** (Albany, Oregon), made the transition to LED lighting years ago as part of broader investments in greenhouse modernization and energy efficiency. What stood out in those early adopters wasn't dramatic winter growth under dark skies, but something more subtle — and more valuable: control. Take a look at the DLI chart. Just two weeks of persistent cloud cover can cut daily light in half (from 4 to 2 mol·m⁻²·d⁻¹) slowing plant growth and potentially creating plant health issues if irrigation and fertility are not adjusted accordingly.

At **Oregon Flowers** (Aurora, Oregon), the decision to install LED lighting wasn't

driven by novelty or trend-following. When a new greenhouse was constructed several years ago, the operation relied on familiar high-pressure sodium systems. What changed wasn't just economics — it was information.

Energy prices climbed. Incentive programs through Energy Trust of Oregon lowered the upfront barrier to adoption. And lessons from Europe demonstrated that the LED learning curve was manageable.

A similar story has unfolded at **AI's Garden & Home** (Woodburn, Oregon), where LED lighting was introduced not to chase winter growth, but to shave time off early spring production.

Across these examples, a clear pattern emerges. Supplemental lighting delivers the greatest return when daily light integral is genuinely limiting growth, crops are capable of responding to additional light, and the rest of the production system is already dialed in.

The real question

For many growers, the most important question is not whether plants can grow under low winter light — they usually can. The real question is whether supplemental lighting changes the production timeline. If added light allows growers to finish crops faster, turn inventory more quickly, and hit narrow market windows more reliably, then lighting becomes less of a cost and more of a strategic investment.

Oregon remains an exceptional place to grow plants. But during winter, light is often the hidden constraint shaping greenhouse performance. Supplemental lighting, used thoughtfully, can move crops out of survival mode and into predictable, efficient growth. ©

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Giddy up for using your voice at the Legislature

This is a big month for our industry. The OAN will be active on both coasts in a major effort to help shape our future.

The battleground includes two capitals — Salem, Oregon and Washington, D.C.

The Oregon Legislature will meet this month for a short session. Over 35 days, elected officials will decide issues that will not only shape the November election, but the industries that reside in our state. Oregon has Democratic supermajorities in both the state house and senate. Democratic Gov. Tina Kotek is up for re-election in November, so the stakes are high.

Meanwhile, Washington, D.C. is immersed in the game of political chicken with the budget, tariffs, labor and control of both houses. This is a recipe for short-sighted decisions and pure party politics.

At stake in Oregon this year

Core issues confront the nursery and greenhouse industry. Here are a few.

Agricultural overtime — The current overtime threshold is 48 hours per work week, but it's set to move to 40 in another year. The association is working to create a pathway for legislation that would support both the worker and the operator by keeping the threshold at 48, but allowing a 12-week, 55-hour exemption during peak season.

State funding for Japanese beetle program — The office of the governor defunded the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Japanese Beetle Program. The OAN is seeking funding to treat infested areas and authorize the ODA to hire critical staff to get the program back on track. This program impacts every grower that ships out of state. This part of the funding is but one of several efforts being made by OAN.

Water — Our first goal is to protect the nursery industry's ability to transfer water rights. There will be a bill that places large restrictions on agriculture's ability to use this tool. Our second goal is to restore accountability and functionality to the Oregon Water Resources Department.

State-appraised property fix — The Oregon Department of Revenue is on the verge of defining property valued at over \$1 million as industrial property, requiring assessment by the state Department of Revenue, rather than county assessors. This would impact many in the association. OAN will support a bill to defeat this definition.

At stake nationally this year

Federal policy is a slow-moving freighter, but its impact can be felt immediately. Certainly that was true with tariffs and immigration enforcement around the country in 2025. However, the federal game is still a long game. With our allies at AmericanHort, I feel that the industry can take a step forward this year.

Research and data — We would like funding for the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to support research, protect market access, and prevent pest and disease threats. We'd like greater research funds for green industry sectors, including nursery, greenhouse and Christmas tree growers, and more collaboration between industry, state and federal funding sources. Finally, we'd like funding to restore detailed annual National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) statistics for Oregon's nursery and greenhouse industry.

Ag workforce legislation — The OAN had asked one of our U.S. Senators to introduce our concept to resolve agriculture's labor issue. However, the bill began to look much like the failed partisan efforts we have seen over the past decade. The association has created a Five-Point Plan, providing clear direction for getting the ball rolling on workforce reform. It includes: 1. Adjustment of status for those in the U.S.; 2. Keep and update the current H-2A and H-2B visas. 3. Create a new visa system. 4. Create a sensible "touch back provision." 5. Once 1-4 are enacted, then E-Verify.

Carbon sequestration — The OAN will build upon the Climate Summit from the Farwest Show to pursue climate policies that reflect the climate benefits of the nursery industry while protecting operations from adverse regulations and higher prices.



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Farm Bill — The Congress continues to kick the main agriculture funding bill down the road and 2026 could see an opportunity to achieve some gains for specialty crops. OAN will work to shore up the Horticulture title to adequately fund pest and disease prevention and push hard for research dollars to confront the many challenges ahead. In terms of disaster relief eligibility, the current farm bill does not work well with specialty crop growers, and the funds are substandard in reach and funding. Whole farm insurance has worked for monocrops but not the diverse multi-year crops such as the nursery and greenhouse industry. Fixing this problem is critical, and the OAN will work on this issue as a stand-alone effort.

Are we ready?

I have a high level of confidence in our ability to meet the challenges ahead. Bill Perry, our state lobbyist, is one of the best and someone you can have faith in.

The OAN's advocacy training just graduated another class last month — continuing our strategy of putting the best assets the industry has in play. That's YOU, the grower. We will have a day at the Capitol on Oregon's birthday (February 14) and will put our considerable presence in the halls of the legislature to make a difference.

Is this a tough month? Without question. Are we up for it? Absolutely. Will we succeed? Time and effort will tell us. But count on this — this is a fight for the industry, its growers, retailers, greenhouse operators and supply chain. We shall meet every challenge ahead of us. ©

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