

A pioneering influence

For nearly five decades, Gary English has been rooted in service and committed to excellence

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

For more than 30 years, Gary English has been a steady presence in Oregon's nursery industry — arriving early, staying late, and nurturing both plants and people.

English, who started **Landsystems Nursery** in Bend in 1978, just concluded an unmatched 33 years of service on the Oregon Association of Nurseries Board of Directors. He has been president of the Central Oregon Chapter since 2006 and continues in that role. Along the way he earned several awards, including Retailer of the Year, and recognition as an Oregon Nursery Pioneer.

Longtime advocate

Over nearly five decades in the green industry and more than three decades of board service, Gary has been an advocate for representation, relationship-building, and practical knowledge in Central Oregon's challenging growing climate. A longtime proponent of collaboration across the nursery, landscape, and contractor sectors, he forged alliances that strengthened attendance and education in a region with few nurseries.

It all began, English recalled, when OAN's executive director at the time, Clayton Hannon, invited him to lead the Bend chapter. "He asked me if I would do it, and I said yes," English said. "I don't know what was the matter with me, but I did it."

Central Oregon's climate and geography isolated it from Western Oregon's bustling agricultural zone, and English immediately saw the need to build connections.

"They just need representation on this side of the mountains, because candidly, there's not a lot of nurseries over here."

To boost participation, English created a multidisciplinary "Green Industry Group" that incorporated landscape contractors in Central Oregon along with OAN growers and nurseries. "To bridge that gap, we formed an alliance with OLCA, the Oregon Landscape Contractors Association."

Friends and longtime colleagues describe a reliable, determined, wry, and quietly passionate man — who in the



From left: Carson Lord, Gary English, Cindy Lou Pease and Jim Simnitt at the 2019 OAN Convention where English received an Honorary Lifetime Membership award. OAN FILE PHOTO

pre-Zoom era always made trek driving over the mountains to the meetings in the Willamette Valley, usually with his dog in tow. A committed Oregon State University Beavers fan, Rod Park (**Park's Nursery**) said he and Hannon had regular dinner bets about the annual Civil War football game with the University of Oregon Ducks — bets which English largely lost.

"He was able to kind of shore up that almost that whole region. He was the face of Central Oregon," said John Coulter, Western Region manager of **Master Nursery Garden Centers** and an OAN past president now based in Phoenix. "And he had the background because not only did he have retail, but he also had landscape design, and he did some growing of his own. So, he had a multifaceted operation, so he understood the different elements that businesses would go through in our industry, which made him a great board member."

Cindy Lou Pease, owner of **Evans Farms** in Oregon City, has known English through OAN for decades.

"We were on the same side of the fence with a battle with the state over workers compensation, and we managed to get through that one together, and that's when I think I really got to know him," she said. "He's very tenacious, and he's very straightforward, and he's got really high integrity. He's willing to stand up for what he believes in and that is

something I always admire."

A man of humor

English's agreeable personality and humor always came in handy.

"He's just one of those people who's always got a happy smile on his face when you see him," said Coulter. "He expresses concerns or ideas or concepts, but he does it in a manner that's very pleasant to work with. That's an important attribute. In the nursery industry we like to say we are competitors by day and friends by night."

One way they bonded were themed costume nights at the convention, and Coulter said, "Gary always really enjoyed dressing up to fit the theme," even if it meant donning a toga.

"Gary has been a reliable partner in both business and volunteering," said Kathy LeCompte, owner of **Brooks Tree Farm**. "As someone who has volunteered with OAN for many years, I can truly appreciate the time and effort he has spent supporting our industry — and at an inconvenient distance. Gary kept the Central Oregon chapter active long after it would have faded, just by being willing. He was instrumental in building bridges between the grower community and the retail and design talent."

"He's been diligent in making sure everyone connects the dots when we don't always understand each other's point >>

of view. He is going to leave a big hole in that on the board.”

A nursery's evolution

A Bend native son, English credits his mother's love for plants — and getting him working in the garden with his four brothers — with igniting his passion for horticulture and design. After graduating from Oregon State University with a degree in horticulture, he went on to earn a master's degree in landscape architecture from Michigan State University. When he returned home, he opened Landsystems in 1978, building it into a full-service garden center and design/build firm.

Bend's high-desert climate, with high winds, low rainfall and humidity, and 85-day growing season (on average), presented distinct challenges from the start. He quickly discovered that plants shipped in weren't ready for Bend. “Bend is very unique from a plant standpoint. Knowledge is key, knowing what you can and can't grow. There are a lot of things that are zoned for here that won't grow here.”

“Our plant palette is way bigger than most people realize,” he said. He skips gingkoes and hackberries (*Celtis occidentalis*) altogether and uses select varieties like the ‘Jack Frost’ series of Japanese maples and H1 and H2 rhododendrons (hardy to -25 and -15 F).

Among the challenges, he said, “We're at 3,600 feet and we get a lot of late frosts. So that takes out a lot of plant material that isn't acclimated. So that's one reason we raise so much ourselves,” he said. “It was hard to get acclimated material, so we started our own growing operation. And the stuff we bring in, we hold it at least a year.”

Pease, who supplies Landsystems yearly, said, “I've tried to get him to try plant material, like ‘Hazel Smith’ sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum* ‘Hazel Smith’). He said, ‘It doesn't do well here and I'm not gonna do it.’ And I keep thinking, ‘It grows in Boise — it ought to grow,’ but he says, ‘We've tried it, and it doesn't work.’”

That dedication to customer success has earned Landsystems a reputation of trustworthiness. English said often buyers

from big box stores aren't local and their buying mistakes are better than any advertising he could do. Many a lifelong customer has been born, he said, when a new gardener comes to Landsystems for help after buying a big box plant that fails.

Park credits English's persistence and creativity with the nursery's longevity in such a challenging site. “Why it's such a great business is that people trust him because he's experienced their experience,” he said, adding that English excels at engaging his customers. “That's kind of a talent. To be able to get people to want to play with their yard, especially in central Oregon.”

Pease agreed, saying, “Their customer service is high. They'll bend over backwards for a customer. They've got customers they've had for 30 and 40 years.”

Landsystems offers design services to help new residents create gardens in this harsh environment.

Climate shifts are opening new possibilities to try some marginal plants again, he said. “We might give redbuds another try,” for instance. “It's a really popular plant with people from Seattle and elsewhere, but we haven't been able to do it.”

The property comprises 22 acres, of which the retail operation claims four.

After years of trial and error with expansions, he's found the nursery's sweet spot.

“When we got to 75 employees, I was in the process of going crazy,” he said. “I said, I'm not having fun, I'm a glorified babysitter.”

Now, with 35 employees, he finds it much more manageable.

“I'm a workaholic, and it's farming basically,” English said. “Farming plants. And I love plants, especially trees. Then there are many of my employees who have been with me 40 years, so it's like family.”

He says he gets up with the sun and works all day, and repeats it until January, when he heads to Hawaii to recharge. The nursery closes from January through March 15, at which point it's full tilt through Christmas.

Bend's meteoric rise

In 1980, Bend was home to about 17,000 people, according to [BendSource.com](#). Now a popular ski and retirement destination,

Bend has grown 500%, to over 104,000 residents today. Demand for housing and land is only growing.

“Everyone wants to live in Bend,” English said.

But even as Bend grows, English says the community remains intimate. “People are always coming to the nursery and encouraging us not to become a subdivision — because there's a ton of those coming up,” he said.

To keep pace with that growth, Coulter said, “He's had to make sure that the industry that we have over there, whether retailer or landscaper, is also involved in the communities and make sure they have a voice in those communities.”

“He's sitting on some extremely valuable property,” said Park. “He doesn't have to do what he's doing. He wants to. When people do that, it tells you there's something about the business that they love that's beyond dollars.”

A strong future

Looking ahead, Gary hopes the industry can rediscover the connection and camaraderie that once defined it.

“When I started, the leadership focused on relationship-building and growing membership,” he said. “We got up to about 1,200 members. I built a lot of great friends and relationships. Now, the focus has shifted to the political and government arena, because there's so much more going on there.”

Remote meetings, he adds, make connecting in person more challenging.

English, 77, got married to Kathy Temple (English) a year ago, “inheriting” two daughters, Alexis and Tatum — one a landscape designer and the other a container nursery manager — whom he hopes will someday take over Landsystems.

But he's in no rush for retirement. “As long as I'm alive and kicking, I'll be a mentor to the group,” he promised. ☺

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