



Angi Bailey, owner of Verna Jean Nursery, is president of the Oregon Farm Bureau. PHOTO COURTESY OF ANGI BAILEY

Giving back

OAN members see benefits and rewards from serving ag industry organizations

BY MITCH LIES

Tom Fessler, president of **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas** (Farwest booth #14043), recalls the disconnect he felt when leaving the Oregon Association of Nurseries Board of Directors after serving for two years in the 1990s.

“All of a sudden, your term is up and you’re off the board and you’re kind of lost in space,” he said. “You feel like you don’t know what is going on. And so, I got back on the Executive Committee to stay in the know.”

Now on the Board of Directors for AmericanHort, Fessler has been serving on association and government boards ever

since. “There are a lot of benefits,” he said. “I bring a lot of ideas back here that I see other folks doing. There is always something to glean.”

Fessler is among multiple OAN members who participate in other agricultural organizations, providing support and leadership to groups in Oregon and beyond.

OAN member Vinny Grasso is president of the Western Region of the American Conifer Society. He also volunteers for The Oregon Garden, which is celebrating its 25-year anniversary this summer, and is an active member of The Maple Society.

“I think being in these organizations helps connect me with the end user,” said Grasso, who is West Coast nursery manager for **EHR** (Farwest booth #16047). “And I enjoy making new friends and meeting people who have the same passion for plants.”

In his work with The Oregon Garden, Grasso sits on the Conifer Garden »



Tom Fessler (holding granddaughter Giana Fessler), president of Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas, is on the board of AmericanHort.

PHOTO BY NOAH FESSLER

Giving back



Vinny Grasso of EHR is president of the Western Region of the American Conifer Society. PHOTO COURTESY OF VINNY GRASSO

Committee, which provides expertise on plant selection and upkeep. He also hosts workdays to ensure the Conifer Garden remains a premier showcase for conifers.

OAN member Josh Zielinski of **Alpha Nursery** (Farwest booth #13037) is following an industry tradition of serving on the state Board of Agriculture. Nursery growers Pete Brentano and Fessler previously served on the same board.



Bethany Rydmark is active in the Landscape Alliance for Immigrant Rights, as well as the Pacific Design Collective. PHOTO COURTESY OF BETHANY RYDMARK

“It is important that we have a nursery voice on the state Board of Agriculture,” Zielinski said. “I am happy to represent the industry and talk about how a policy might affect nursery owners. I think I offer a pretty good view of what is fair and what is needed and what’s not needed from our perspective.”

“You try to be an educational voice for your industry, when for instance



Emily Iverson is general manager of Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm and serves as state chair for Oregon Farm Bureau's Young Farmers and Ranchers. OAN FILE PHOTO

somebody for the Department of Fish and Wildlife comes and gives a talk and has questions about farming in general and in the nursery industry, in particular.”

Working together

When it comes to working on ag policy on a state level, few are more involved than OAN member Angi Bailey of **Verna Jean Nursery** (Farwest booth #11043). She has

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Alpha Nursery's Josh Zielinski serves on the state Board of Agriculture. OAN FILE PHOTO

served as president of the Oregon Farm Bureau for five years. Bailey believes in bringing people together to address policy issues.

"Given that Oregon is such a diverse agricultural state, there is great value in all the agricultural organizations working together," Bailey said. "The challenges facing Oregon agriculture are immense, and we need everybody investing, engaging and leading in this state. The way I see it, our agricultural industry is strongest when we are all working together and rowing in the same direction.

"And, as a grower of nursery stock, I feel I am able to bring a valuable perspective to the Oregon Farm Bureau about Oregon's top agriculture commodity."

Emily Iverson, an OAN member and general manager for **Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm**, volunteers for several organizations, including the Oregon Farm Bureau, where she serves as state chair for Young Farmers and Ranchers. "I think it is important to speak up and be a leader and be involved," Iverson said. "You are able to help build consensus and guide decisions that can benefit you and your family and others around you."

Iverson, 27, also serves on the Oregon Farm Bureau Scholarship Committee, is on the board for the North Marion Tourism Collaborative, and has participated in events with the OAN leadership group NexGen.

OAN member Bethany Rydmark of **Bethany Rydmark :: Landscapes** is active in the Landscape Alliance for Immigrant Rights, as well as the Pacific Design Collective, a collaboration she launched for women in landscape architecture.

"It is really nice to be able to take my professional perspective and contribute where it's going to make a difference for people," Rydmark said. "And whether that is in >>



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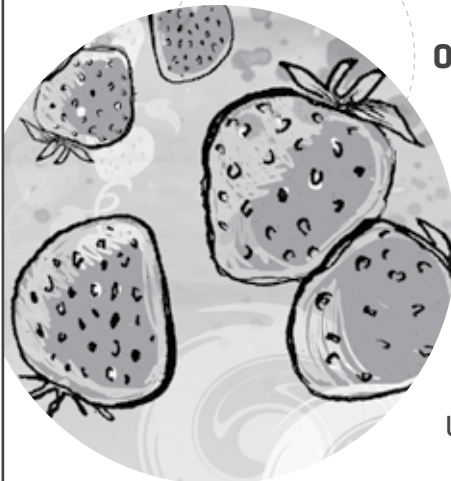
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Giving back

humanitarian ways or in plant-material ways, I enjoy contributing and making the industry more robust and more healthy and enjoyable for all of us as a whole.”

Rydmark said she has long seen the value in joining organizations. “When I was right out of college, I jumped in and joined the American Society of Landscape Architects’ State Executive Committee and helped set in place things that now, 20 years later, are still going,” she said. “So, it is wonderful to look back and see that it makes a difference.”

Volunteering for associations and government boards is not without its costs, both in terms of time and in some cases resources. Members of the state Board of Agriculture, for example, hold two-day meetings in different parts of the state, which often requires them to spend a couple of days away from the farm and family.

Still, OAN members said the benefits of participation far outweigh the sacrifices.

“You get exposed to other forms of agriculture throughout the state, which is interesting and often beneficial,” Fessler said. He noted that seeing the irrigation canal systems in place in Southern and Eastern Oregon helped him visualize different ways to enhance the water use on his farm. “It exposes you to a lot of things that if you just stayed here in the (Willamette) Valley, you wouldn’t be exposed to,” he said.

Zielinski, who has served on the state Board of Agriculture since 2020, said he, too, has enjoyed learning more about the state’s agriculture. “It’s been a really good experience in terms of learning more about Oregon agriculture as a whole,” Zielinski said. “You get some pretty cool site tours.

“And it has been interesting and valuable to learn more about our Department of Agriculture. We’ve long known our nursery inspector, but that was about it. Now I’ve gotten to know several people

working in all sorts of different capacities and have learned to appreciate what the department does in terms of dealing with a never-ending list of issues, and with a limited budget.”

Worth the effort

Members of AmericanHort meet in sites around the country and are not compensated for travel expenses, but Fessler said it is worth the time and expense to be part of the group.

“It exposes a lot of areas of the country to us and the diversity that we have here in Oregon, and the quality that we produce here, and I think that has a benefit for our state’s nursery industry,” he said.

Iverson, too, said it is beneficial for both her farm and the state’s nursery industry to serve on organization boards. “It helps to get your name out there to give back in ways that help move the industry forward,” Iverson said. “It builds consensus, and that helps not only your family’s business, but also others around you.”

“It is about more than just yourself and more than even just your company, it is about looking out for the industry and ag as a whole,” said Zielinski regarding his service on the state Board of Agriculture.

OAN members also find intangible rewards in serving different organizations.

Rydmark recalls the reward she felt during a recent meeting of Landscape Alliance for Immigrant Rights, a group she co-founded. She found it incredibly rewarding “seeing a group of people gather that wouldn’t have, had it not been for our organization.

“Folks were able to share some of their biggest fears and worries and concerns,” she added. “[They gained an] understanding from people around the table that you are not alone and that somebody has your back.

“You realize that together we can all do more, and we can inspire more people to do more than they would have otherwise.” ©

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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