

Digger

The background of the entire cover is a close-up photograph of several hellebores. The flowers have large, overlapping petals that are white with deep pink or magenta edges. The centers of the flowers are filled with numerous yellow stamens. The leaves are dark green and serrated. The lighting is soft, highlighting the textures of the petals and leaves.

SEPTEMBER 2026

Bejeweled

Hellebores made
more desirable

PAGE 27

ONF scholarships
launch careers

PAGE 33

Getting smarter
about spraying

PAGE 41

+PLUS

FARWEST SHOW WRAPUP

PUBLISHED BY



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Printed in Oregon on domestic recycled paper when available.

On the cover: Ice N' Roses® Rosado Hellebore (*Helleborus × glandorffensis* 'Coseh 5400').
PHOTO COURTESY OF MONROVIA NURSERY COMPANY

On this page: Left: Winter Jewels® 'Peppermint Ice' Hellebore (*Helleborus × hybridus* 'Peppermint Ice'). Photo courtesy of Little Prince of Oregon

Right: More than 4,000 nursery professionals came to the 2026 Farwest Show. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

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The beetle is back
— and this time,
it's wearing a tutu.

Some pests refuse
to stay buried.

RAIDERS OF THE LOST BARK



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Learning your challenges face to face

One of the things I've enjoyed most during my time as OAN president has been getting out and visiting your farms.

Over the past nine months, Jeff Stone, Beth Farmer, Stephanie Collins, and I have been making our way around the state visiting OAN members.

We've been averaging four or five visits a month, and if all goes as planned, we'll hit our goal of visiting 50 nurseries before my term is over.

I'll admit, I wasn't sure how these visits would be received. A few people looked a little nervous when we pulled into the driveway. I think they thought we were there to conduct some kind of audit.

Once they realized we were just there to visit, ask questions, and listen, everybody relaxed. We even got a few laughs out of it.

Every nursery has been different. We've visited operations that cover hundreds of acres and others that fit on a single acre.

Some are expanding, some are just trying to keep up, and some are wondering what the next few years are going to look like. No matter the size of the operation, we always leave having learned something.

The biggest reason for these visits isn't to tell members everything OAN is doing. It's to hear what's going on in your world. What's keeping you up at night? What's going really well? What should we be paying more attention to? Those are the conversations that matter.

It also gives members a chance to ask us questions. Sometimes people aren't exactly sure what OAN is working on behind the scenes, and that's understandable.

Advocacy, regulatory issues, labor, water, transportation, the Japanese beetle — there's a lot happening that most people don't see every day. These visits give us a chance to explain what we're working on and why it matters.

One thing I've learned is that no two



Patrick Newton

nurseries have the exact same concerns. That's why it's so important for us to get out and see people face to face.

Emails and surveys have their place, but they don't replace standing in someone's shop or walking their fields. You learn a lot more during a one-hour conversation than you do reading a dozen emails.

These visits have also reminded me how many good people make up this industry. Everywhere we've gone, we've been welcomed with a handshake, a tour, and honest conversation.

People have been willing to share both their successes and their challenges, and that's one of the things that makes this industry so special. There's a real willingness to help each other, and it's something I'm proud to be a part of.

We've still got a ways to go before we reach my goal of 50 visits while I'm president, and I'm looking forward to every one of them.

Thank you to everyone who has welcomed us onto your farms, taken time out of your busy day, and shared your thoughts with us. Those conversations help us do a better job representing our members, and I hope they continue long after my term as president is over. For me, these visits have been one of the most rewarding parts of serving you. ☺



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*.

SEPTEMBER 1-4

2026 IPPS WESTERN REGION ANNUAL MEETING

Join the International Plant Propagation Society Western Region for its Annual Meeting September 1-4 in Salt Lake City, Utah at the Hilton Salt Lake City Center. Included in the meeting are daily speakers and conference tours of propagation nurseries. For more information, go to WNA.IPPS.org/Events/2026-IPPS-wr-Annual-Meeting.

SEPTEMBER 12

NEXGEN INNOVATION TOUR

Save September 12 for NexGen's exciting innovation tour in partnership with Oregon Farm Bureau's Young Farmers and Ranchers. The event will be at Crosby Hop Farm, 8648 Crosby Road N.E. in Woodburn, at 1 p.m. The groups will be touring the farm and then heading over to Topwire, the craft beer garden at Crosby, for a little happy hour. Crosby Hop Farm is a fifth-generation family farm in the Willamette Valley. Attendees will get a chance to see the farm and learn a little more about what goes into producing the hops that eventually make their way into breweries around the country. Register at OAN.org/Events.

SEPTEMBER 14-16

AMERICANHORT PLUG & CUTTING CONFERENCE

Join AmericanHort in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for the Plug & Cutting Conference to learn the best strategies, technologies, and techniques from industry experts. This conference offers specialized education and networking opportunities just for plug and cutting producers. Expert speakers dig into crop management practices, production inputs, pests and diseases, and more during in-person sessions. Plus, one track features education taught in Spanish. After the conference, get access to select recorded sessions. Add the optional production tour to visit Lucas Greenhouses, North Creek Nurseries, Star Roses & Plants, and Longwood Gardens. Each stop is paired with on-site instructional stations that reinforce practical skills. Register at TinyURL.com/PROFILELNLOSU.

SEPTEMBER 22

NURSERY PRODUCTION FIELD DAY

Profile Growing Solutions is excited to host a free educational event focused on helping ornamental crop growers improve profitability, production efficiency, and sustainability. The event from 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. on September 22 is hosted by **Robinson Nursery Inc.** in partnership with Oregon State University and presented by Profile Products. The nursery is located at 9339 S.W. Trestle View Lane in McMinnville. Admission is free and a catered lunch is provided. Fertilizer door prizes will be



PHOTO COURTESY OF SUNRIVER RESORT

NOVEMBER 6-7

OREGON ASSOCIATION OF NURSERIES CONVENTION AT SUNRIVER

Make plans to attend Raiders of the Lost Bark: The 2026 OAN Annual Convention, November 6-7 at Central Oregon's spectacular Sunriver Resort and reconnect with friends, celebrate our industry, and making memories together. Gather your team for a weekend filled with laughter, recognition, great conversations, and the relationships that make OAN and Oregon's nursery industry stronger. Join OAN for fresh ideas, new connections, and opportunities that will help shape the future of our businesses and our association. Complimentary childcare will be available during these events: Hospitality Suites, Annual Meeting, and President's Awards Banquet. All attendees must register. Discounted room rates are available to members who are pre-registered to attend the convention. Room reservation information will be provided after your event registration has been completed. Room rates start at \$159 plus taxes. OAN's room rate group discount registration deadline is September 7 for homes/condos and October 6 for guest rooms. Registration and full schedule are available at OAN.org/Convention2026.

offered. Please RSVP at TinyURL.com/ProfileLNLOSU.

SEPTEMBER 26

HARDY PLANT SOCIETY PLANTFEST

Save the date for The Hardy Plant Society of Oregon's popular annual PlantFest, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. September 26 at Clackamas Community College's Gregory Forum. Expect amazing speakers and vendors selling plants for your fall plantings. For more information or to register, go to TinyURL.com/HPSOFest.

NOVEMBER 8-11

ELEVATE: THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE & EXPO

Elevate brings landscape and lawn care professionals together for practical learning, peer conversations, new solutions and the kind of industry connections that continue long after the event ends. Elevate education is built for landscape and lawn care professionals who want ideas they can actually use. Learn from industry leaders, hear what is working inside companies like yours and join peer

conversations designed around your role, specialty and stage of growth. Every part of the program is designed to help you solve business challenges. Get a feel for the energy, people and experience waiting for you in Tampa, Florida November 8-11. For more information, go to Landscapeprofessionals.org/ELEVATE.

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: September 16, October 14, November 18, December 16. Spanish: 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. ©



All abuzz

A sense of excitement was in the air at this year's Farwest Show

More than 4,000 nursery professionals came to the 2026 Farwest Show, with more than 30% attending for the first time. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

BY VIC PANICKUL

A good buzz and sense of excitement filled the aisles at this year's Farwest Show. "The vibe was amazing. Everybody seemed excited to be here, excited to see which nurseries were here, and excited to reconnect with friends and associates," said Farwest Show Committee Chair Mikaela Eaton, farm manager for **Eschenfelder Farms**. "The traffic was great all day Wednesday and Thursday morning, I was so busy on Wednesday that I couldn't leave my booth."

"It felt like a homecoming," said Mark Leichty, director of business development at **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery**, which returned to the Farwest Show after a long absence. "We wanted to make sure everyone knows we haven't just disappeared."

There was a sense of anticipation from the younger staff members who were working the booth. "It was rewarding to see their creativity in putting the booth together and they were rewarded with a [Best 10x10] booth award from Farwest,"



AmericanHort CEO Lionel van der Walt, center, listens intently to Farwest Keynote speaker Charlie Hall. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

Leichty said.

This year's attendance at Farwest was strong with more than 4,000 attendees. More than 30% were first-time attendees, said OAN Trade Show Manager Connie

Lindsay. There were more than 300 exhibitors, including 55 that were new. Education seminars registration increased 17% from last year, said Events and Education Coordinator Jamie O'Brien. ➤



Farwest Show Committee members Ryan Holmes (Truck Transportation Services), Mikaela Eaton (Eschenfelder Farms) and Joe Carli (All Green Goods) catch up at Spirit of 77 at the Pub Crawl. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP



OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone is dunked for donations to the Oregon Nurseries Foundation. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

“Attendees were able to grow their knowledge at Farwest with seminars covering everything from horticultural purchasing 101’s to pesticide safety to garden podcasts,” O’Brien said.

“One new seminar attendee was so impressed with the show that she told her company they should be an exhibitor next year,” Lindsay said. “The exhibitors really showed well this year. The show floor looked amazing and many of the new products shown by the new exhibitors were definitely a highlight for me.”

This year the show also created some exciting energy with two special features: a pet adoption area, and a dunk tank hosted by exhibitor Ash & Acre that raised money for ONF scholarships.

“The puppies and kittens were definitely a big hit,” said Lindsay. Visitors would wait patiently to cuddle with their favorite furry adoptee.

And on Friday afternoon, guests lined up to make donations to the Oregon Nurseries Foundation for the opportunity to dunk OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone by throwing balls at a target. It was all good-natured fun for a good cause. “These special events added to the excitement on the show floor,” Lindsay said.

“We were very happy at the turnout for the show and for our booth,” said Daniel Ornelas, regional sales manager with REPSO. “We have a new product

and we’re a first-time exhibitor and we had great interest,” he said. “We’ll be back next year with more staff because we were so busy we couldn’t get away from our booth to visit customers who are also exhibitors here.”

“My impression of Farwest was very positive,” said first-time attendee and CEO of AmericanHort Lionel van der Walt. “The quality of the exhibitors and the concentration of nursery businesses in the region make it a very valuable gathering. What stood out most was the strength of the relationships across the industry. It is a great environment for reconnecting with members, meeting with growers, and having meaningful conversations about the opportunities and challenges facing the industry.”

“We usually send a team of store managers and buyers” to the Farwest Show, said Jose Menendez, VP of operations for SummerWinds Nursery, which operates stores in the California Bay Area and around Phoenix, Arizona. This year was no different.

“This has been a good show for us,” said Athena Boyer, co-owner of **SeaCoast Compost** of Charleston, Oregon. “There was a lot of movement especially during the first day.”

“I’ve been pleased,” said sales rep Lucia Christie with **Blooming Nursery** in Cornelius, Oregon. “It’s been busy for us all three days and the traffic has been

steady. We’ve seen a lot of existing customers and it’s a great place to do that — multiple people in the same spot!”

“The show’s been really good and we’ve gotten a lot of interest from nurseries who have sought us out because they’re curious about drones,” said Jonathan Buswell, of **HarvestWise Drone Solutions**. “There was an automation summit here and it was very well attended. Asa [DeForest, the owner] was a panelist and as soon as that summit was over, we had a flood of people at the booth. We’ve had a lot of good interaction at our booth and there’s been no big gaps in traffic. It’s been one of the better shows in the past five years.”

“It’s been a good show for us and we’ve seen a lot of our clients and vendors,” said George Carter of GGS Structures of Vineland Station, Ontario, Canada. “I think next year we will bring one more person with us.” The traffic was busy enough that Carter and his counterpart could not leave the booth and another person at the booth would let them be able to see their customers who were exhibiting and couldn’t leave their booths.

“This is our first show and our owner wanted us to come to find a West Coast distributor,” said Kirk Vanderschel of Versailles Garden, which manufactures pottery, fountains and high-end greenhouses. “We ended up with a really good booth



Scan QR code to watch a video of OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone at the dunk tank.

location and traffic has been very good.”

“Overall, I think there has been better traffic and a lot more energy at this show than last year,” said Carlton Davidson, west regional sales manager for **Bailey Nurseries**. “There are a lot of new faces here, but I’ve also been able to see a lot of our existing customers too. We did something different this year and scheduled for our booth. The traffic has been steady so we scheduled two inside sales reps to work the booth and two more sales people to walk the aisles outside the booth to meet customers rather than everyone standing here. You also get to see the new varieties being shown in the show in case we see something that we should be growing too.”

For noted economist Charlie Hall, Ph.D., professor of international floriculture at Texas A&M University and Farwest Keynote speaker, it was his sixth

trip to Farwest. “It was a great show,” he said. “It’s always good to see all of the beautiful plant material and the networking here is incredible. A lot of people miss the fact that you have to form the relationship with people before you can make the sale. And you can’t develop trust unless you meet face-to-face with them.”

In this year’s keynote address, Hall conceded that we live in an unpredictable world these days. However, he challenged green industry businesses to make their best possible strategic decisions with the information they have, whether looking at production levels, pricing, or capital investments. The key is knowing the difference between risks, which are known, and uncertainties, which can’t be predicted.

All indecision has a cost. Those who study, set a personal deadline, and then act are most likely to be rewarded, he said.

Overall, the post-COVID market

for plant products has remained strong, Hall said. He expects even more demand once more people start purchasing homes, which the numbers say will happen.

“We have a latent demand for 1.7 million housing units between now and 2030,” he said. “When mortgage rates get below 5.5%, that’s a tipping point. Everybody that’s been waiting in the wings to buy and sell a house, they’re gonna pull the trigger, and when they pull the trigger, they’re gonna need some flowers, shrubs and trees and landscaping services.” ☺

Vic Panichkul is managing editor of Digger magazine and publications manager for the Oregon Association of Nurseries. He’s passionate about the outdoors and cooking and lives in and travels in an Airstream trailer based in Oregon wine country. Contact him at 503-582-2009 or VPanichkul@OAN.org

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Eschenfelder Farms wins Best in Show

Visitors to this year's Farwest Show were greeted by some creatively displayed booths from both growers as well as suppliers.

Impartial, non-industry volunteer judges walked the floor to find the best of the best. They chose **Eschenfelder Farms** of Canby, Oregon for the overall Ted Van Veen Best in Show booth award for 2026. This award comes with a free 10x10 booth space for the 2027 Farwest Show.

Six exhibitors were chosen for best in division prizes, and three others were awarded Far From Ordinary booth awards for exceptional creativity. The Best of Division award winners included the following:

Growers

- Best 10x10 — **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery Inc.**, Aurora, Oregon
- Best 10x20 or Larger Row Booth — **Youngblood Nursery, Inc.**, Salem, Oregon
- Best Island Booth — **Bailey Nurseries Inc.**, St. Paul, Minnesota



Eschenfelder Farms won the overall Ted Van Veen Best in Show booth award. The award comes with a free 10x10 booth space for the 2027 Farwest Show.

PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

Service and Supply

- Best 10x10 — **SeaCoast Compost**, Charleston, Oregon
- Best 10x20 or Larger Row Booth — **HarvestWise Drone Solutions**, Oregon City, Oregon
- Best Island Booth — **OBC Northwest**, Canby, Oregon

Far From Ordinary

This award recognized exhibitors who put extra creativity into their booths.

- **Blooming Nursery**, Cornelius, Oregon
- **Gripple Inc.**, Aurora, Illinois
- **Monrovia Nursery Company**, Dayton, Oregon ©

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People's Choice winner Sofia® Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus* 'Zsofi' PP33411).

Judges Choice winner Saturnalia™ American hybrid oak (*Quercus* 'HSLMK' PPAF). PHOTO COURTESY OF HERITAGE SEEDLINGS AND LINERS

Sofia® Cherry Laurel and Saturnalia™ American hybrid oak shine at New Varieties Showcase

Sofia® Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus* 'Zsofi' PP33411) was voted as the People's Choice Best in Show winner in the 2026 Farwest Show's New Varieties Showcase. Show attendees voted and the winners were announced on the last day of Farwest.

Introduced by Concept Plants and **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas**, it was one of 26 outstanding new selections at the 2026 Farwest Show.

"Plant breeding and new plant introductions help fuel the nursery industry and drive innovation," said Connie Lindsay, trade show manager for the Oregon Association of Nurseries, which produced the show. "People attending Farwest got to see a tremendous variety of high-quality new introductions. We're thrilled these new plants are entering the market and excited that we have a role in helping make that happen."

According to Concept Plants and Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas, "Sofia® Cherry Laurel is a game changer. It's a beautiful, easy-care ornamental cherry that delivers year-round appeal. It features fine-textured, elegant foliage that creates a light, refined look throughout the growing season. Its compact habit makes it perfect for small gardens, patios, entryways, streetscapes, and urban landscapes, where it can be used as a low hedge or a graceful accent in mixed plantings."

"It responds well to pruning and is easy to shape. Combining outstanding ornamental value with improved disease resistance over 'Otto Luyken', *Prunus Sofia* is an ideal choice for homeowners and landscape professionals alike." It matures to 60 inches tall and 40 inches wide. Zones 5a-8b.

In addition to the People's Choice Best of Show award, voters chose three Awards of Merit as follows:



Centennial Ruby™ Hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Hokocentennial' PPAF). PHOTO COURTESY OF MONROVIA NURSERY COMPANY

Centennial Ruby™ Hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Hokocentennial' PPAF), selected from a hydrangea breeding program in the Netherlands, and introduced and submitted by **Monrovia Nursery Company**. According to Monrovia, "A special release to celebrate Monrovia's 100th anniversary, the flowers of this hydrangea are simply stunning. The rich ruby- ➤



Candybox® Chilean Guava. PHOTO COURTESY OF PROVEN WINNERS® COLORCHOICE® SHRUBS

red mophead blooms deepen in color as the long-lasting flowers age, sometimes taking on almost black hues. Exceptionally sturdy and compact, with strong stems and thick green leaves. Reblooming. Deciduous." Grows to 3 feet wide and tall. Zones 4a–9b.

Candybox® Chilean Guava (*Ugni molinae* 'Pl16' PPAF), hybridized by Viveros Hijuelas de Quillota, Chile and introduced by **Proven Winners® ColorChoice® Shrubs**. According to Proven Winners: "New compact form of Chilean guava that makes an excellent drought-tolerant hedge. Adorned with delicate, silky flowers throughout the plant in summer, the resulting fruit is an explosion of spices and sweetness in autumn. Drought tolerant, evergreen and well-behaved shrub for the landscape and edible gardens." Grows to 2–3 feet wide by 2–3 feet tall. Zones 7a–9b.

DreamScape™ Smooth Hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens* 'BAICZ10' PPAF, CBRAF), introduced by First Editions® Shrubs & Trees and submitted by **Bailey Nurseries**. According to Bailey, "DreamScape™ Smooth Hydrangea represents a major advancement in pink *Hydrangea arborescens*, delivering value for growers, retailers, and landscapers. Bold 8–10-inch mophead flowers open ruby pink and ages to parchment pink, held upright on strong stems that withstand wind and rain. Dark green foliage stays clean in production, on the shelf, and in the landscape. With a uniform, mounded habit at 3–4 feet tall and 4–5 feet wide, DreamScape™ is adaptable



DreamScape™ Smooth Hydrangea. PHOTO COURTESY OF FIRST EDITIONS® SHRUBS & TREES

to sun or part shade. Bred by Bailey Nurseries, it sets a new standard in the category." Zones 3a–8b.

Earlier in the week, professional judges awarded the New Varieties Showcase Judges Choice awards.

Judges' Best in Show — Saturnalia™ American hybrid oak (*Quercus* 'HSLMK' PPAF), introduced by **Heritage Seedlings & Liners Inc.** A hybrid of Silverleaf (*Q. hypoleucoides*) and Red Oak (*Q. rubra*), it was found among seedlings grown at Heritage Seedlings & Liners. Red-blushed new leaves mature to glossy dark green with acute lobes and thick texture, silvery green beneath. Long lasting fall color is bronze-green to rusty red. Vigorous upright growth, a strong leader, open branch angles and wide adaptability merit its use as an urban tree across the continent. Early trials show it to thrive in the heat and humidity of North Carolina, as well as its first winter at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Grows to 25 feet wide by 40 feet tall. Zones 5b–9b.

In addition to the Best of Show award, judges gave three Awards of Merit:

Lantana Luscious® Vanilla Breeze™ (*Lantana camara* Luscious® Vanilla Breeze™ PPAF), introduced by **Proven Winners® ColorChoice® Shrubs**. According to them, "As beautiful as they are, sometimes bold red or gold lantanas just won't work in some container recipes or landscape designs like those where pastel pinks and blues dominate. That's where the elegant Luscious® Vanilla Breeze™ lantana shines. This lantana's fragrant blossoms open soft, buttery yellow and



Lantana Luscious® Vanilla Breeze™. PHOTO COURTESY OF PROVEN WINNERS® COLORCHOICE® SHRUBS

mature to white — an essential color that brings balance and refinement. They are produced abundantly all over the large, well-branched, spreading canopy of this large, landscape-sized lantana. Luscious Vanilla Breeze is a heat tolerant lantana that works beautifully in mass landscape plantings and large container recipes, adding a cool splash of white on hot summer days. Like all Proven Winners lantanas, it produces few to no seeds and requires no deadheading to bloom non-stop all season." Height and spread 20–26 inches. Zones 9a–11a.

Sofia® Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus* 'Zsofi' PP33411) — Details above.

Crimson Feathers False Spirea (*Sorbaria sorbifolia* 'Hyfaria' PP36847), introduced by Concept Plants. According to them, "A truly spectacular addition to the *Sorbaria* family, Crimson Feather is a beautiful, compact and extremely hardy shrub that boasts large, feathery golden leaves with new, intense crimson-red growth, creating a beautiful contrast to the mature lime-green leaves. The stunning red color holds into summer and is truly a sight to behold. *Sorbaria* Crimson Feather's new red growth is the brightest in the assortment so far, and as if that's not enough, Crimson Feather is not susceptible to diseases either. A stunning, trouble-free cultivar and deserved winner of Gold at the HTA New Plant Awards 2022. *Sorbaria* Crimson Feather looks beautiful in pots, borders, and Japanese gardens, but it will also make an impressive low hedge that will attract pollinators from far and wide." Height and spread 40 inches. Zones 2a–11a. ©



Peeking into the future

Burro makes mobile, autonomous vehicles for various industries including farms and nurseries. PHOTO COURTESY OF BURRO

The Automation Summit gives a glimpse at how new tech can improve margins

BY CURT KIPP

For decades, growers have relied on mechanization to streamline production, improve quality, maximize output and ensure the strongest margins.

But the challenges of 2026 require new solutions. And as the 2026 Farwest Show Automation Summit made clear — newer, smarter automation technology can move the needle.

Panelists at the summit included three technology vendors, as well as two growers who have proven eager to embrace what the new technology offers.

“Using technology to help stretch your labor use is imperative,” said OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone, who moderated the discussion.

The panelists pointed to new tech capabilities not seen before. Robotic utility vehicles that carry things. Aerial drones that inventory fields and apply chemicals. LiDAR systems that map the fields. Advanced AI analytics that interpret the LiDAR scans, generating actionable info about growing plants as they move through production.

And, of course, production machinery for pruning and fertilization is more advanced than it’s ever been. All of this gives growers a fighting chance against mounting labor expenses, poor labor availability, and compressed margins.

Chris Thisen grew up on a farm in California, where he learned about automation needs and challenges. He now serves

as director of enterprise sales for **Burro** (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), which makes mobile, autonomous vehicles for farm use.

“The idea is, hey, if we can come in and not replace labor, but come in and get that person out of the tractor seat, he or she can do something more valuable,” he said. “That’s really the goal.”

Automation engineer Asa DeForest started **HarvestWise Drone Solutions** (Oregon City, Oregon) in 2024. He has brought 37 years’ experience in factory automation to the task of developing grower solutions. “I look at agriculture as if it is a manufacturing process,” he said.

HarvestWise drones are now spraying crops, taking inventories, mapping fields and more. “This year alone, I’ve done over 9,000 acres of application work,” Forest said. “We have flown probably close to 3,000 acres of inventory management, and upwards of about 1.3 million trees of inventory type of work.”

Di Hu, a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University, cofounded Moss Robotics. She and her team initially looked at making a self-driving robot to handle on-farm tasks, but found the developmental obstacles steep. They pivoted to creating an 18-pound piece of hardware, about the size of a shoebox, that can be mounted to existing equipment. It is outfitted with automotive-grade LiDAR, along with a brain to process what it “sees.”

“You can scan your fields by just driving around with it, and you can even scan multiple rows,” Hu said.

The hardware has an NVIDIA Jetson computer to process gathered data and generate overnight inventories. “Our goal is to help you track the growth, track the movement of your plants, so you can

start accumulating valuable, transferable knowledge on your fields and your crops, year over year,” Hu said.

With solutions like these, forward-looking growers are embracing the future.

Todd Nelson, co-owner of **Bountiful Farms & Nursery** (Woodburn, Oregon) — a large grower of woody material — has visited Europe annually for years to learn how production happens there. Europe was traditionally ahead of the U.S. on automation due to higher labor costs, but now, with a higher minimum wage in Oregon and mandatory agricultural overtime, automation investments also make sense here.

“We prune the majority of our plants now with automation,” he said. “All of our fertilizing’s done with automation.”

Bountiful has also practically eliminated backpack spraying in its fields, enabling one person to do what 8–9 did previously.

Growers like Nelson and Tom Fessler, owner of **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas Inc.** (Woodburn, Oregon), are highly concerned with return on investment.

Each expense needs scrutiny. “You can automate yourself out of business,” Nelson said.

However, tech providers like Thiesen, Hu and Forest said they can lay out a strong case for the ROI on their technologies.

“For our stuff, we have seen ROI as soon as within three months, actually,” Hu said.

“The best ROI that I’ve seen on a \$31,000 purchase was in five months on a drone that we sent out,” Forest said. ©

Curt Kipp is director of communications and publications at the Oregon Association of Nurseries and the editor of Digger. Contact him at 503-582-2008 or CKipp@OAN.org.



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Deciphering Oregon's recycling law

From right: Emily Rooney (executive director of the California Association of Nurseries and President of Agricultural Council of California), Tom Martin (director of sustainable solutions for Growscape), Chris Anderson (owner of Anderson Pots), Matthew Hawth (vice president of Krueger Tree Farm & Nursery), Mark Bigej (co-owner of Al's Garden & Home), Rachel Pick (senior manager for advocacy and government affairs at AmericanHort), and Jeff Stone (Executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries). PHOTO BY TOM BREWER

Panel attempts to shed light on confusing law and define impact for growers

BY VIC PANICKUL

The topic of plastics recycling isn't pretty, but it's definitely complicated where Oregon's Recycling Modernization Act is concerned.

And the 50 or so attendees of the Plastics Recycling Roundtable Thursday, August 27, at the Farwest Show were hoping that the law's impact would be made more clear by the panelists of experts and nursery owners: Emily Rooney (executive director of the California Association of Nurseries and President of Agricultural Council of California), Tom Martin (director of sustainable solutions for **Growscape**), Chris Anderson (owner of **Anderson Pots**), Matthew Hawth (vice president of **Krueger Tree Farm & Nursery**), Mark Bigej (co-owner of **Al's Garden & Home**), and Rachel Pick (senior manager for advocacy and government affairs at AmericanHort).

OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone moderated the discussion.

Seven states — Oregon, California, Colorado, Maine, Maryland and Minnesota — all have extended producer responsibility laws. Oregon's law went into effect in 2022, but it has been tied up in a lawsuit and was just upheld on August 27. "OAN is working with the California association and AmericanHort to create options for states to deal with this issue," Stone said.

The law was drafted and approved to advance Oregon's policy goal of shifting its recycling costs from governmental entities to



This story has been condensed. Scan the QR code to read the full version.

producers. It says the producers of packaging must bear some of the costs of collecting and recycling certain packaging materials.

"State or municipalities are trying to shift the burden from taxpayers in the state onto the producers and brand owners and manufacturers for the disposal and recycling of their packaging. This works by essentially requiring the producers to report to the state every single pound, every different type of package that they've sold ... and then pay a fee on each pound — the fee being different based on the type of material that you've used," Marting said.

Some nurseries are trying to make changes now.

At Krueger Tree Farm & Nursery, they're using an air pruning pot called Pioneer System and they're growing in it.

"What we're doing right now is we'll get to roughly a three-gallon and we'll knock it off and then we'll repackage [the plant] for shipment because I'm trying to get ten years or so [out of those Pioneer Pots]," Hawth said. "We also use an Ellepot machine. It's a paper pot, but once again, it's still sitting in a tray. We're trying to do the best we can, and we've just been pushing the limits further and further."

Part of the problem is how to get the plant material to retailers and have it be in a sellable form. "We're even looking at some cellulose fabric that we can wrap it around with. But once again, when that goes into retail, that might be an issue because it might not be able to be watered," Hawth said. Some paper packaging can be maybe held for 30 days, but

at that point, it may no longer be sellable.

There's also a lot of confusion about who is responsible for the packaging and who will have to pay the fee.

"Unfortunately, someone has to become responsible for those products. It has been deemed that typically, whoever's responsible for those products is supposed to be the person who makes it retail-ready. Well, in this case, if the wholesale nurseries are exempt from that, then it gets kind of passed to the retailer because ... we're the next person down the chain," Bigej said.

The way the Oregon law is written, it isn't very clear who is responsible for what.

"This is how I believe its inferred, but nothing is really stated," Bigej said. "From what I can gather, if there's a brand on a product, whoever's brand it is, they're responsible for it."

"So if we're selling a **Proven Winners** product through our store, we're not responsible for it. But if it's unbranded, then we are responsible for that product," Bigej said. "And by responsible, we're supposed to report how much of that we use that goes to the consumer by weight and by product type. So it's not that it's just a 4-inch plastic pot that we have to figure out the empty weight on, but also what type of plastic that's made from. We have to independently report that. I don't know how in the world we would do it. How we would sort out all the different vendors we get from and be able to say: 'No, that's a branded pot. That's not our responsibility. This little 4-inch pot, we sold 3,000 of these, and so that must be three pounds of this plastic,' etc., etc., etc."

"From our perspective that's quite cumbersome," Bigej said. ©



Q&A With Lionel van der Walt, CEO of AmericanHort

AmericanHort CEO Lionel van der Walt attended the Farwest Show in Portland, Oregon. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

New CEO introduces himself to OAN and discusses important industry issues

BY VIC PANICKUL

I had the opportunity to sit down with Lionel van der Walt, the new president and CEO of AmericanHort, in advance of the Farwest Show and ask him some questions before his visit to Farwest and Oregon. The following is a portion of the interview, edited for length and clarity. You can read the full interview online at [DiggerMagazine.com/QALionel](https://diggermagazine.com/QALionel).

Q: Please tell us a little bit about yourself and your professional career.

A: My background started off with many years in the association field at a global level, where I worked for the International Air Transport Association (IATA) which represented most of the airlines around the globe — British Airways, American Airlines, Singapore Airlines. [It covered] anything that touched on the airline sector, the passenger side of the business as well as the cargo side.

From there, I transitioned to another association ... IBEC, the International

Institute of Building Enclosure Consultants. [It] represents building enclosure consultants, which are mainly architects and engineers. [I] transitioned from there to the startup side, where I was working in startups and logistics.

Working at AmericanHort takes me a bit back to my roots, where my passion is serving broader issues through an association, but also deeper roots. Growing up in South Africa, where some of my family members had farms, I spent a lot of time growing up on those farms. I love the land and my mom and my stepfather and my stepbrother, they still manage large farms in South Africa.

So really, that deeper love for the land, and then combining it with association work is where I am today.

Q: What are some of the most interesting things you've learned so far about the nursery industry?

A: One of the very interesting things I've learned so far is ... that many of these businesses are generational family businesses, which is very different [from] many other industries that I've been in. You've got multi[ple] generations that have built these businesses up, and starting many times with a guy in a truck ...

and then growing it onto these very successful large corporations.

These businesses are squeezed in terms of input costs, labor costs. And then also ... if you look at regulation when it gets to ... pest control, insecticides, and all of that..., how is that managed in a responsible manner?

I'm seeing a lot of technology coming into the industry. The larger companies are really at the forefront of that — robotics, AI, automation — but obviously we want to see how can we get those benefits to some of the smaller to mid-sized businesses out there.

Q: We're doing this interview ahead of the Farwest show, and we're glad you're coming to Oregon, and you're going to experience the show for yourself, and hopefully visit some of our nurseries while you're here. But what are you looking forward visiting the most in Oregon?

A: First and foremost, meeting the people and getting to know the region and the businesses in the region. That's my prime objective. I'm also getting the opportunity to meet with some other industry experts, like Charlie Hall. Seed Your Future, which is another group that I'm really passionate about.... I think



Scan QR code to watch the video of the interview with Lionel van der Walt.

they do an incredible, important job, and they've got a very important role in making this industry an industry that's really at the forefront of both educators and the next generation. And then, obviously, the OAN is really important also. Getting to work with the regional associations, strengthening those ties and collaboration is another important aspect for me.

Q: What do you think are the most important challenges facing us at the federal level right now?

A: Well, everything I've heard in my travels so far, and [since] I ... joined AmericanHort is labor, labor, labor. That seems to be the number one issue for almost everybody out there. I think there's two key areas right now that we need to really pay attention to.

Number one is the Farm Bill. So we're getting to the close of a window that we can actually impact and get the

Farm Bill out. We've really made good progress on the Hill from the House side where it's past committee there and we've got a really, really forward thinking, really strong bill that's come out on their side. On the Senate side, we're stuck in markup. I would like to urge everybody [to] reach out to your senators. You might not think it will have an impact, but it really does.

The other aspect at the federal level is the Securing Agriculture Workforce Act, which is another very, very important piece that we need to get through. That's basically modernizing the H-2A program, which impacts labor once again, making it more accessible, bringing in more reliable and consistent wage criteria ..., and then also the process for applying and using these programs, streamlining that and making it a lot easier for everybody.

And then the last piece I would

mention also is federal relief is really important for everybody across the horticulture industry. There's a bill that's going through right now ... it's a 12 billion package. From what I understand, about 5 billion of that ... is being targeted for the specialty crops ... and we really need to push to get that through.

If you go onto our website, AmericanHort.org/Advocacy/VoterVoice, [makes] it really easy ... to you reach out to the right people on the hill so we can get them moving on this. ☺

Vic Panichkul is managing editor of Digger magazine and publications manager for the Oregon Association of Nurseries. He's passionate about the outdoors and cooking and lives in and travels in an Airstream trailer based in Oregon wine country. Contact him at 503-582-2009 or VPanichkul@OAN.org

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Guests enjoy cocktails amongs plant displays at Monrovia's nursery in Dayton, Oregon. More than 800 guests attended. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

A centennial jubilee

Monrovia Nursery Company celebrates 100 years of innovation and looks to the future

BY VIC PANICKUL

A celebration on Thursday, August 27 at **Monrovia Nursery Company's** headquarters in Dayton, Oregon marked the centennial of the storied nursery as it looks toward the future.

"A hundred years ago, Harry Rosedale began growing plants differently than everyone around him, and that willingness to innovate became the root of everything we've built since, attracting customers who value the difference we provide," said former CEO Miles Rosedale. "Today, our nurseries and craftsmen carry that same spirit forward to ensure our future of growth."

"From the very beginning Monrovia nursery has been about craftsmanship," said Monrovia President and CEO Jonathan Pederson. "As we celebrate our 100th anniversary, we are as passionate and committed to quality today as Harry E. Rosedale Sr. was in 1926. This week we are celebrating Monrovia's legacy and focusing on our bright future."

"Our craftsmen, customers, and our partners are the heart and soul of our business. Together we are ready for the next 100 years."

Those customers and partners were among the more than 800 guests who attended the dinner on the grounds of the Dayton, Oregon, nursery. The dinner capped a weeklong series of tours and other special events for customers and partners visiting the nursery.



From left: Allana Childs, Sara Cimbali, Frank Benzing, Marion Benzing, Quinn Tremayne and Jose Menendez of Summer Winds Nursery attended the Monrovia celebration as well as the Farwest Show. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

"It's amazing. It's quite an accomplishment for any business to be in business for 100 years," said Keith Krout, owner of Progreen Garden Center in Crawfordsville, Indiana, which has been in business 34 years. "I was a new customer to Monrovia and my sales rep invited me out. I was quite impressed and made Monrovia my primary source for my nursery stock."

"Everyone's been really excited energized," said Monrovia Plant Selections Coach Georgia Clay. "It's been great to have garden center customers talking to breeders and it's been a great experience for them."

"Monrovia's an iconic nursery and they have the most exciting genetics in the industry," said Allison Pennell, territory sales manager for **Coast of Maine Organics**. "You can count on them for excellent varieties. Plus they've made Dayton their official home. We love Monrovia." Pennell took a break from the Farwest Show to attend Monrovia's event.

Frank Benzing, CEO of

SummerWinds Nursery, brought several of his executives with him to Monrovia's celebration and the Farwest Show. The retail nursery has its headquarters in Boise, Idaho but operates several nurseries in the greater Phoenix, Arizona and Silicon Valley, California.

"It's really cool to see and understand what they're doing and how that affects retail," said Jose Menendez, vice president of operations.

"Their craftsmanship shows in their products," said Sara Cimbali, special projects manager. "There's a lot that happens behind the scenes that you're not even aware of." ©

Vic Panichkul is managing editor of Digger magazine and publications manager for the Oregon Association of Nurseries. He loves the outdoors and cooking and lives in and travels in an Airstream trailer based in Oregon wine country. Contact him at 503-582-2009 or VPanichkul@OAN.org



J. Frank Schmidt III and his wife Barbara at the 80th anniversary celebration at J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. PHOTO BY JON BELL

Celebrating a milestone

J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. celebrates 80 years as a nursery standout

BY JON BELL

If the folks at **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.** were hoping for an ideal evening to celebrate the nursery's 80th anniversary, they certainly got what they wished for the night of Wednesday, August 26.

Recent wildfire smoke had cleared to a fresh blue sky and Mt. Hood rose off in the distance out over the nursery.

"Tonight is about looking back with gratitude, but it is also about looking forward," said J. Frank Schmidt III during his remarks at the celebration. "Our family ownership has always had the goal to continue to grow this nursery company into the future. We want to build on what Mom and Dad started 80 years ago and continue to make J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. something the next generation can be proud of."

Making it 80 years in any industry is commendable, but maybe even more so in the nursery business. Frank and Evelyn Schmidt had just tied the knot in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and driven across country back to Oregon in a 1946 Studebaker sedan. When they got here, they planted trees on 10 acres of land west of Troutdale, riding the post-war boom

that created a huge demand for trees as new residential development sprung up around the country.

"The nursery and our family grew up together," Schmidt said. "As kids, we worked in the fields during the summers, we weeded, we drove tractors, collected budwood, helped in the office, did more weeding. And of course, I worked the hardest."

Eventually, JFS would expand to more than 3,000 acres across multiple properties, most in the fertile corner of northwest Oregon, but also out east in Milton-Freewater. For its first 40 years, the nursery was known for its bare root trees. Then in 1984, JFS pioneered a process for containerizing trees that helped extend the selling season.

Along the way, JFS also became a leader in developing and introducing new tree cultivars. It has introduced more than 100 new ones to the market over the years, including the wildly popular Red Sunset Maple, Royal Raindrops Crabapple and Redpointe Maple.

Schmidt himself retired about six years ago, handing the reins to now-CEO Ben Rough, but the business remains in the family and another generation is growing into the leadership roles.

"Even though a lot has changed in 80 years, one thing that really hasn't changed is that our goal has always been to grow the best trees ever," he said.

At the celebration event, Schmidt acknowledged that JFS continues to achieve that goal only because of a true team effort.

"That goal could never have been achieved by our family alone," he said. "I especially want to thank all of our great employees, past and present, who worked hard through the years to grow and ship the best trees we could for our customers. JFS is what it is today because the people that have given their time and talent and hard work to the company."

When considering the legacy of JFS, Schmidt said it was "just nice to know that we've created a lot of shade and beauty around the company." He also said the company has been set up to transition to the next generation to "hopefully continue on forever."

Rough, who joined the company in 2020 just at the COVID-19 pandemic was settling in, also spoke at the party before guests lined up to dine. He said he's enjoyed the friendships he's made and acknowledged the importance of relationships in ensuring the success of the nursery and the industry. ☺

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.



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.



OAN announces new fuel partnership

The Oregon Association of Nurseries has announced a new fuel partnership with Portland-based **Star Oilco** that will give member businesses access to preferential cardlock rates as well as bulk fuel deliveries. The program is in effect now, and members can get signup information at OAN.org/Fuel.

The prices members pay will be tied to the Oil Price Information Service wholesale benchmark plus a negotiated markup. These are cheaper on average, over time, than prices the public pays. Enrolling in and using the program will reduce fuel costs for members and help them save money.

Members who enroll will be able to get cardlock-rate fuel from Pacific Pride as well as CFN locations, together totaling more than 240 locations throughout the state. They will also be able to fill up at secondary locations that give access to the Pacific Pride and CFN networks. Members will receive an OAN-branded Pacific Pride card as well as an OAN-branded CFN card to show their affiliation.

Members who receive fuel deliveries will receive tank fuel quality testing, tank monitoring, and, if they need it, discounted tank cleaning.

For more information, contact Ian Strong at 503-283-1256 or Ian.Strong@StarOilco.net.



GOP nominee for Oregon governor, State Sen. Christine Drazan (R-Canby) visited with members of the OAN Government Relations Committee and pledged her support for the nursery industry. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

GOP GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE KRISTINE DRAZAN VISITS FARWEST SHOW

State Sen. Christine Drazan (R-Canby), the Republican nominee for Oregon governor, visited with members of the OAN Government Relations Committee at the 2026 Farwest Show. There, the longtime ally of the nursery industry reiterated her belief in its importance. “You guys as an industry are critically important to our state, to our economy, to our communities, and I view it as a privilege to be able to spend time with you guys during this show,” she said.

Drazan pledged to provide support and relief against regulatory and cost pressures that she said punish business. “We have got to say, ‘We’re open for business. We want you here. What’s it gonna take for you to grow? What are the limitations on your growth?’” Drazan said.

Drazan opposes the state’s agricultural overtime law, which has been phased in over the past four years. The overtime threshold started at 56 hours, then moved to 48 hours in 2025 and will drop to 40 hours on January 1, 2027. Other issues she mentioned included the state’s corporate activity tax, or CAT, which taxes gross revenues. “That tax, for it to be uniquely heavy on activity within our borders, not based

on profit, entirely based on activity, it’s irrational,” she said.

Drazan mentioned eliminating Oregon’s Climate Protection Program, which was created by executive order in 2020. It phases in emissions caps over time. “I look forward to tearing up the Climate Protection Program on day one,” Drazan said. “I’m super excited to take that executive order and light it on fire.”

She blamed high living costs in Oregon largely on the state’s energy policies.

“If we are gonna have this approach that we must decarbonize everything, it’s expensive,” she said. “If we’re only wind and solar, and we have now abandoned the concept that even natural gas is clean enough for us, and hydropower isn’t even on our list for being green enough for us, then we’re not, we’re not serious about ensuring that our economy is strong and growing.”

REGENCE BLUECROSS BLUESHIELD CHOSEN AS NEW OAN HEALTH INSURER

The Oregon Association of Nurseries has selected Regence BlueCross BlueShield as its new association health plan insurer, replacing Providence Health Plan. OAN’s longtime agency, Leonard Adams Insurance, will continue to

serve as plan broker and administrator.

The change was needed after Providence announced in May it would no longer offer health insurance. The not-for-profit provider currently insures 1 in 10 Oregonians. Their planned exit caused a seismic disruption to the market, and the OAN acted quickly to take care of members' future needs.

"We were one of many organizations facing a huge scramble to provide coverage," OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone said. "The goal of the board was to have minimal disruption to members."

OAN and Leonard Adams Insurance conducted a thorough search for a new insurer, exploring many options and proposals. Regence emerged as the top option, with 43,000 providers available in-network, compared to 30,000 under the Providence Signature network. The insurer offered the greatest likelihood of stability, as well as the least disruption to participating groups.

"There's a high likelihood the insured will be able to go to the same doctor," Stone said.

Likewise, insured employees can expect similar coverage to what they currently receive. Regence will mirror the current deductibles, co-pays and out-of-pocket maximums under the current coverage from Providence. Plan costs are expected to go up about 18%, which is not out of line in the current market.

"Health care inflation is real," Stone said. "We're not in a position to dictate that costs will flatline when no one is offering that."

The main drawback of the new plan is that Salem Health, owner of hospitals and clinics in Marion and Polk counties, is not in-network under the Regence plan. Stone pledged the association's resources as well as Leonard Adams' assistance to help insured employees find new health care providers in the Mid-Willamette Valley that best meet their needs. Those insured will also have Regence's online search tools at hand to help find providers from the network of 43,000 that are available.

OAN, Leonard Adams, Providence and Regence are cooperating to make sure the transition to new coverage under the »

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OAN Health Plan is as smooth as possible. Providence coverage will remain in effect through December 31 and the new Regence coverage will take effect January 1.

For more information, contact Victoria Montebancho, 503-296-0077, VictoriaM@LACoInsurance.com or Kai Krokum, 503-922-4825, KaiK@LACoInsurance.com.

TWO OREGON GROWERS GRADUATE FROM HRI LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

Two Oregon Association of Nurseries members — Andrea Avila-Aragon (**Smith Gardens**, Aurora, Oregon) and Amanda Staehely (**Columbia Nursery**, Canby, Oregon) — have completed the Horticultural Research Institute's Leadership Academy class of 2026.

The advanced, one-year program helps experienced horticulture profession-

als elevate their influence while expanding their strategic thinking and business skills. Built around in-person classes, peer collaboration, and mentorship, the academy prepares leaders to confidently navigate business challenges, drive innovation, and spark positive change in their businesses, the industry, and their communities.

Avila-Aragon oversees Smith Gardens' largest facility, producing over half its annual volume. Originally from Costa Rica, she has a background in corporate finance and production operations, and she brings global perspective and strong leadership rooted in Lean practices and people development in horticulture across international markets. She is a board member of the OAN.

Staehely owns and operates her family nursery and recently served as president of the OAN. She brings a bold voice in advocacy, entrepreneurship, and grass-

roots leadership.

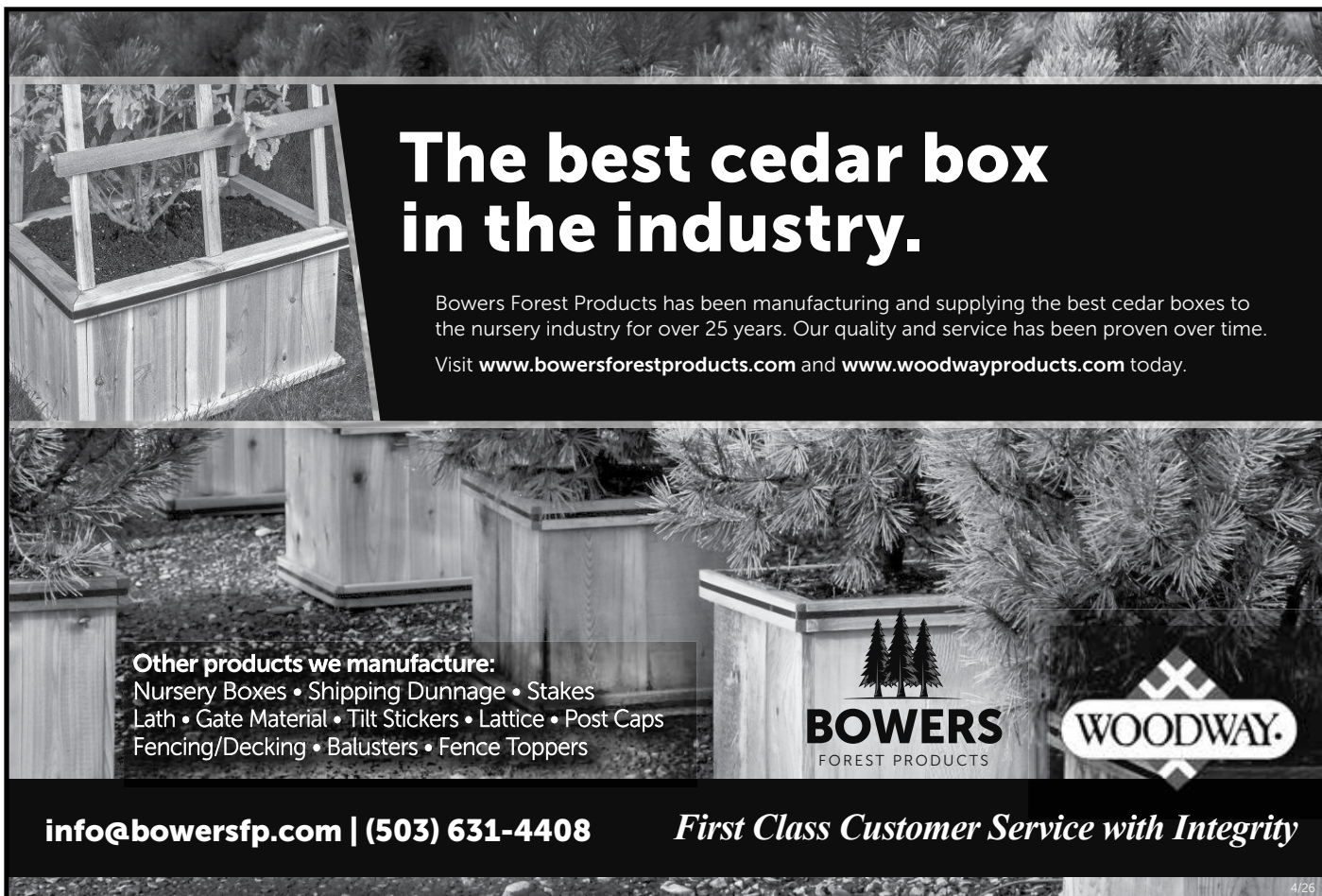
She has significantly grown her company's revenue and reach. She is also active in community-based programs that support youth and the arts.

INTERSTATE BRIDGE PROGRAM PASSES MILESTONE

The Interstate Bridge Replacement Program, which would replace the aging Interstate 5 bridges between Oregon and Washington, has completed its federal environmental review process, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported.

The approval will kickstart construction on the replacement span, which is a vital link for commerce in the Pacific Northwest.

The project will remove the existing bridges, and add an auxiliary lane, connections to Hayden Island and State Route 14, and space for light rail on the



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new bridge.

This initial build has been scaled back due to funding challenges. The planned rebuild of additional interchanges north of SR 14 and south of Hayden Island will wait until there is funding.

The decision also allows bridge planners to hire a contractor in 2027. That company will be in charge of replacing the bridge structure and building the corresponding on- and off-ramp connections.

2026-27 NURSERY GUIDE BOOK MAKES ITS WAY TO SUBSCRIBERS

OAN has published the 2026-27 Nursery Guide book, which includes plant, service, supply and company listings in an easy-to-find format.

At 304 pages, this year's book saw a boost in listings volume from last year,

with the inclusion of numerous new plants that were not previously part of the database. Many of these can be viewed on the homepage of **NurseryGuide.com**.

NurseryGuide.com and its print counterpart aim to connect retailers and green goods buyers with growers and green goods suppliers.

Professional subscriptions to the book are free. However, this year's copies have already been bulk mailed to OAN members and qualified nursery professionals. Individual mailed copies after the initial mailing are \$14 each to cover shipping and handling costs (domestic), and can be ordered at **TinyURL.com/OrderNG**.

The book was distributed at the Farwest Show in August, and will also be available for free at other shows, including MANTS (Baltimore) in January, ProGreen (Denver) in February, and Cultivate'27 (Columbus) next July

As always, NurseryGuide.com can be searched live. Both the book and the site have the same information, except that the website is updated anytime someone adds or drops a listing.

NURSERY LICENSE FEES FUND IMPORTANT RESEARCH

The Oregon nursery industry has made a huge impact in nursery research, collectively funding more than \$4.8 million since 2007 through a partnership between the Oregon Association of Nurseries and the Oregon Department of Agriculture. The grants are primarily funded through the Nursery Research Assessment Fee, paid to the ODA through Oregon nursery license fees.

For 2026, the OAN Research Committee, which makes recommendations to the ODA on the grant winners, »



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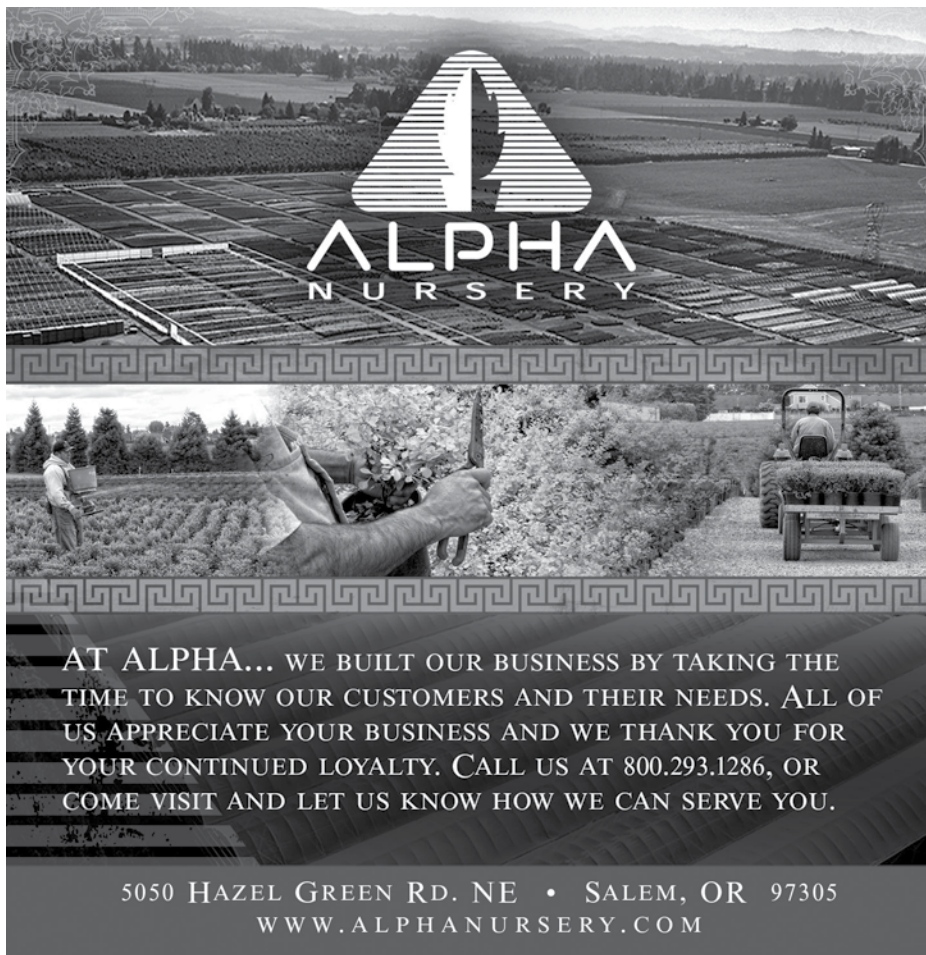
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decided to fund 13 research proposals totaling \$370,077 out of 34 that were submitted. The projects ranged from pesticide efficacy to sterile forms of economically important nursery crops and biopesticides for thrips control in horticultural and nursery crops.

Additionally, OAN was recognized by AmericanHort for the Oregon Nursery Fund at HRI reaching the \$500,000 milestone, a goal OAN members had set 30 years ago when the organization started contributing in 1994.

Learn more about the ODA/OAN research grants and see recipients dating back to 2019 at TinyURL.com/ORGreenResearch.

Announcements

PROVEN WINNERS NAMES NEW SENIOR VP OF MARKETING

Shira Schwarz has been named senior vice president of marketing for the newly unified **Proven Winners**.

A versatile brand leader with a strong background in direct-to-consumer marketing, Schwarz brings a diverse set of skills and impressive experience to the team, Proven Winners stated in a release.

Schwarz has spent her entire career in marketing, spending years leading and developing brand and communications strategies at PepsiCo for Quaker, and later, Tropicana. In her most recent role, Schwarz served as vice president of brand marketing for meal delivery service Home Chef.

MCHUTCHISON ADDS SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SALES REP

Don Golema is the new Southern California sales rep for **McHutchison**, a U.S. horticultural distributor serving North American greenhouse and nursery markets.

He has more than a decade of experience in business development and enterprise account management across the precision agriculture sectors.

Most recently, Golema supported the horticulture lighting segment with Philips Lighting and Signify. ©



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WINTER BEAUTIES

Hellebore breeders are focusing on extending flowering season and improving plant and flower structure

BY EMILY HOARD

Hellebores are riding a growing wave of interest, and why not? There's a lot going for this plant, a winter bloomer sometimes called Lenten rose, Christmas rose or winter rose.

From new colors to extended flowering season and improved plant and flower structure, plant breeders are building a more appealing plant for consumers. One of those breeders is **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery** in Aurora, Oregon.

Breeding hellebores

Mark Leichty, director of business development at Little Prince of Oregon Nursery, has been growing hellebores personally for >>

Winter beauties



Page 27: A selection of blooms from Little Prince of Oregon's Winter Jewels® collection. PHOTO COURTESY OF LITTLE PRINCE OF OREGON.

Facing page: Clockwise from top left: *Helleborus x glandorffensis* HGC® Ice N' Roses® Red Romance 'HG 1410' PP36512, *Helleborus x glandorffensis* HGC® Ice N' Roses® Purple Sunrise 'HG 1428' PP36095, Winter Jewels® *Helleborus x hybridus* 'Peppermint Ice', Winter Jewels® *Helleborus x hybridus* 'Onyx Odyssey'. PHOTOS COURTESY OF LITTLE PRINCE OF OREGON AND HEUGER

more than 30 years. He owned Fry Road Nursery in Albany, Oregon, at the time when Northwest Garden Nursery became the only Oregon nursery to start breeding hellebore hybrids and developed the Winter Jewels® collection.

"I have watched over the years as this unique line, the Winter Jewels®, came into being, and we grew and sold these beautiful plants at Fry Road Nursery," Leichty said.

Leichty joined Little Prince in 2014 and several years later, he worked with Ernie and Marietta O'Byrne, of Northwest Garden Nursery in Eugene, Oregon, to try breeding the hellebores at Little Prince.

This small trial, however, was not successful and the idea was abandoned until 2021, when the O'Byrnes reached out again to see if Little Prince might want to purchase Winter Jewels® and continue their breeding work.

"This was an incredible opportunity,

and one we were much better prepared for by 2021," Leichty said. "We had just hired Alexa Patti, as an assistant head grower, and her attention to detail made her the perfect person to oversee and build the program into the future."

Little Prince finalized the purchase of the Winter Jewels® collection in 2023.

Developing hellebore hybrids

Hellebores are primarily bred through hand pollination and are grown from seeds. At Little Prince, the plants are kept in a greenhouse that's sealed off from pollinators, so they are meticulously hand-pollinated with a paintbrush.

"By doing this, we can slowly 'steer' the breeding of these beautiful plants to exhibit the traits we want them to express," Leichty explained. "There are currently twenty-four distinct varieties, fifteen doubles and nine singles, with the

newest addition, Winter Jewels® Golden Daffodil hellebore (*Helleborus x hybridus* 'Golden Daffodil'), being a daffodil-flowered variety, which is semi-double and really does resemble a daffodil flower."

Since Little Prince breeds all of the Winter Jewels® by hand-pollinating and producing seeds, the process of producing new varieties is a slow one. It takes several years for the seedling to flower so it can be evaluated.

Seed vs. tissue culture

Some *Helleborus* hybrids are produced through tissue culture. There are significant differences in production and characteristics between the two methods, said Sabine Seeling, a product consultant for North America at German-based plant breeding company Heuger.

"I think tissue culture production opened up the entire market to hel- ➤



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Winter beauties



Facing page: Clockwise from left: *Helleborus* × 'Walhelivor', *Helleborus* × *glandorffensis* 'COSEH 4700' PP31181, *Helleborus* × *hybridus* 'Fire and Ice', *Helleborus* × *glandorffensis* HGC® Ice N' Roses® Pink Promise 'HG 1412' PP36399. PHOTOS COURTESY OF LITTLE PRINCE OF OREGON, MONROVIA NURSERY COMPANY AND HEUGER

lebores because they can be produced in very large numbers," Seeling said. She added the continuous breeding from tissue culture has helped breeders improve characteristics of the hybrids too.

Other differences to consider between the seeds and tissue culture hybrid varieties are where they can be planted and how they should be treated in the garden. Hellebores generally perform better in the shade and are sensitive to the sun. But some hybrids produced with tissue culture are more heat and drought tolerant, Seeling said.

Seed varieties are harder to produce and are less uniform and less hardy in general, Seeling said. "There are significant differences between the two depending on what the grower or breeder does," Seeling said. "The breeding has led to significant improvements in the plants and flowers and how they perform over the years."

Extending the blooming season

Megan McConnell, plant information director at **Monrovia Nursery Company** in Dayton, Oregon, said hellebores are a great way to add blooms in the garden in late winter through early spring. They're "the perfect sign of spring," McConnell said. Monrovia grows about a dozen varieties of hellebores.

"Not only do they flower in late winter and early spring, but they are also so hardy that I've seen their foliage year-round with the mild winters we've been having in Oregon," said Brandon Brookfield, a member of the sales team at **Youngblood Nursery Inc.** in Salem. "I worked at a floral design studio in Portland for five years and hellebore were always a seasonal treat for us."

There are early varieties that bloom in November and December, there are mid-winter flowering varieties, and there are others that bloom later in February through April. By combining these different varieties in a garden, gardeners can have an extended flowering season.

Versatility

"They're an early nectar source for pollinators and are also deer resistant," McConnell said.

WHAT THEY'RE GROWING

In addition to hellebores mentioned in the story, here's a sampling of what nurseries are growing.

Hauger

- Ice N' Roses® (*Helleborus glandorffensis*)
- Winter Ballet® (*H. lemperii*)

Little Prince of Oregon

- *H. Winter Jewels*® 'Amber Gem'
- *H. Winter Jewels*® 'Berry Swirl'
- *H. Winter Jewels*® 'Double Painted'
- *H. Winter Jewels*® 'Fire and Ice'
- *H. Winter Jewels*® 'Picotee Pearl'
- *H. Winter Jewels*® 'Peppermint Ice'
- *H. Winter Jewels*® 'Sun Flare'

Monrovia

- Ice N' Roses® Merlot Hellebore (*H. glandorffensis* 'COSEH 4700')
- Ice N' Roses® Rosado Hellebore (*H. glandorffensis* 'Coseh 5400')
- Ivory Prince Hellebore (*H. x* 'Walhelivor')

Youngblood Nursery

- *H. 'Painted Bunting'*
- *H. 'Double Painted'*
- *H. 'Jade Tiger'*
- *H. x 'Cotton Candy'*

Plus they thrive in the shade and are perfect for a woodland garden, Brookfield said.

Their resistance to deer makes them popular for growers and gardeners in the Northwest and other parts of the country where deer are common, Seeling said.

Show-stopping blooms

"Whether it is a potted plant or a cut flower, they're always a showstopper with so many colors from white, all the way to dark burgundy," Brookfield said.

Breeders have improved plant and bloom structure, including large outward and upward facing flowers instead of the traditional nodding flowers, Seeling said. Tissue culture has also produced first-year flowering hellebores.

Seeling said breeders have also >>

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Winter beauties

developed unique colors with different features, including dark centers or dots.

They are also producing more robust evergreen hybrids with a bigger habit that are heat and cold tolerant.

"They are producing a lot of flowers with increased disease resistance that perform well for the growers," Seeling said.

McConnell said the outward or upward facing blooms have become the standard in the industry as opposed to the drooping blooms that were harder to see in the garden from older Hellebore varieties. She said the breeders are also focused on new colors and more flowers.

Brookfield said the new hybrid cultivars that stand out to him are in the Ice N' Roses® (*Helleborus* × *glandorffensis*) collection.

"We introduced them to our nursery last year, this year being the first time we've had them on our availability," Brookfield said. "They seem to sell very well and we're very excited to be carrying them!"

He also enjoys the Winter Jewels® varieties for their soft pink to dark cherry-red flowers.

Brookfield said Youngblood Nursery's fan favorite tends to be the double-flowered hellebores.

"We receive quite a bit of inquiries for these as they have multiple layers of petals instead of the usual five," Brookfield said. "Their flowers have a great dimension to them, so I can understand why they are so sought after."

McConnell said Monrovia is also selecting varieties that produce more abundant flowers and hold their blooms for a very long time.

"We are also looking for densely packed plants, both flowers and foliage," McConnell said.

A long-term value for customers

"They're such a long-lived perennial to have in the garden, and they're robust

in coming back every year in a time when there are hardly any other plants or flowers," Seeling said. She added they are popular as cut flowers as well because of their long, sturdy stems.

"Nowadays they're much easier to grow for commercial growers because of all the elements produced in the breeding, so they're a great item to have in the fall and winter because growers can work with them in those times of year," Seeling said. "It's a great plant, and they do very well, especially here in the Pacific Northwest and in other parts of the country." ☺

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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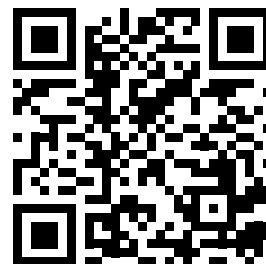
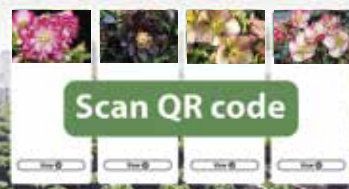
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A greener start

ONF scholarships help recipients launch their career in horticulture

Tyler Beasley got hooked on horticulture through a summer job at a local independent greenhouse and learned about the Oregon Nurseries Foundation scholarships through *Digger* magazine. PHOTO COURTESY OF TYLER BEASLEY

BY VIC PANICKUL

America can't be prosperous without young people showing the initiative to learn, grow and enhance agricultural production.

That's why the Oregon Nurseries Foundation (ONF) rewards students for working towards their goals with scholarships. Each year, we profile several former scholarship recipients to provide *Digger* readers with their personal and unique stories of success. If those stories are any indication, then the future of our green industry is very bright.

Tyler Beasley

Horticulture instructor, Spokane Community College.

Spokane Community College, 2009 AAS in Greenhouse/Nursery Management; OSU, 2019 BS in Ornamental Horticulture.

Tyler Beasley didn't grow up on a farm. It wasn't until he was in college that

he developed an interest in horticulture.

"While working on my associate of arts degree, I picked up a summer job at a local independent greenhouse," Beasley said. "When I witnessed the process of greenhouse production and took on more growing roles, the owners noticed my strong interest. She recommended that I pursue an Associate of Applied Science in Greenhouse/Nursery Management at Spokane Community College. The first quarter in the program was my 'ah-ha! moment' when I realized that there is a science to production and an entire industry that revolves around plants."

At that time, he also picked up another part-time position as a nurseryman at another local nursery and became obsessed with trees and shrubs. "Michael Dirr's writings in *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants* became my daily reading. My original copy was utilized so much, it now remains in pieces," he said. »



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A greener start



Parker Guy (pictured with his son Miles, 3) was fortunate enough to work at other nurseries outside of Oregon and bring back ideas to make his nursery more successful. PHOTO COURTESY OF PARKER GUY



High school teacher Jaimee Brentano teaches a variety of subjects such as animal science, plant science, vet science, introduction to agriculture courses and agricultural leadership. PHOTO COURTESY OF JAIMEE BRENTANO

Beasley learned about the ONF scholarships by reading *Digger* magazine.

"It was a publication that I subscribed to as a horticulture student and continued reading it while I was managing greenhouses," he said.

Beasley didn't receive any encouragement to apply, but was working full-time and trying to start a family. "I did not want any student debt, so I only took the amount of quarterly courses that I could afford along with scholarships," he said. "I graduated with zero student debt!"

After graduating from Oregon State University, he continued to manage the Spokane Community College greenhouses.

"I was completely happy as a grower," Beasley said. "It was then later down the road that the former instructor was leaving his position to move closer to family. I was offered the position as an interim. After the first quarter, I knew that sharing my years of growing experience was what I needed to do. I still miss the

full-time growing responsibilities, but working directly with students and their diverse career goals is also extremely fulfilling."

If he had one piece of advice for students, it would be this. "Passion for any subject is just as important as knowledge. Some of the best lessons I've learned involved hands-on, in-the-field, work experience," Beasley said. "Textbooks, and references are a great tool, but having the discipline and motivation, to take action, goes a long way!"

"If, I was allowed to offer another piece of advice, it would be networking! Put yourself out there and make a name for yourself!"

Parker Guy

Part owner Guy & Sons Nursery
Colorado State University, Fort Collins, 2010 BS
Horticulture with an emphasis in Business
Management and a minor in Business
Administration

As a kid, Parker Guy enjoyed being outside. "It was always fascinating to

watch something grow from nothing into something," he said.

Guy's father, Kevin Guy, spent more than 50 years in horticulture. "I was fortunate enough to learn from some of the most influential people the Oregon nursery industry has seen," he said.

Guy can't remember exactly how old he was when he knew he would go into horticulture and join the family business. "I can't remember how old I was, but I was young," he said. "The people in our industry and how genuine they all were and still are cemented my decision to make this industry my professional career. The idea was to always come back to the family business after college. I was fortunate enough to be able to work for other nurseries outside of Oregon and bring back different ideas to help make our business more successful."

Guy & Sons Nursery in Gaston, Oregon, is a longtime OAN member. Guy

said he became aware of the ONF scholarship from *Digger* magazine. “My parents encouraged me to apply for any financial help that I could get,” he said. “After graduation, I came back home to work at the family business. I think I have gotten to where I am now by constantly learning, treating people with the respect that they deserve and being willing to change.”

Guy’s advice to those in college now is to focus on relationships. “We are a small industry in the scheme of things; relationships mean everything!”

Jaimee Brentano

9-12th grade teacher, Mountain View High School, Bend, Oregon

Oregon State University, 2015, B.S. in agricultural science with a minor in leadership in 2015; 2016, M.S. in Agricultural Education.

Jaimee Brentano is no stranger to agriculture. She grew up on the farm in St. Paul, Oregon, where her family owns Brentano Farms Inc. and **Brentano’s Tree Farm**. “Our farm is a diversified crop farm, but the tree farm produces wholesale nursery stock,” Brentano said. “In high school I worked for both the farm and tree farm, getting hands-on experience in the industry.

“I’ve always taken great pride in my family’s direct involvement in agriculture, and also was heavily involved in my high school’s agriculture/FFA program,” Brentano said. “I got to be involved in the harvesting of crops, maintenance of tree growth, and greenhouse plant propagation/production.”

These experiences helped her develop an interest in learning more about the agriculture industry and she’d always had a stronger interest in the plant sector.

Brentano was researching agricultural scholarship opportunities when her uncle, Pete Brentano, who had served in OAN leadership positions, mentioned the Oregon Nursery Foundation scholarships to her.

“My parents were big advocates of applying to scholarships, and were especially good at helping me seek out scholarships for women pursuing a career in the agriculture industry,” she said. “Because of this, I >>

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A greener start



Growing up Mark Bigej always knew that working at Al's Garden & Home was what he wanted to do. Being in the family business was all he knew and he never wanted to do anything else. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

graduated college with very little debt, so I try to apply that same form of encouragement to my students each year in helping them find scholarships for their postsecondary goals — including ONF scholarships!”

“Receiving the scholarship made it so that I could put my focus on my academic experience rather than worry about the financial aspects of college. I enjoyed the opportunities I got to not only to learn about agriculture at OSU, but also become involved in the many clubs OSU has to offer. Having time for these activities helped me built a network within the agricultural community that I still am a part of today.”

“I was applying for teaching jobs while finishing up my master’s degree, and was hired at Mountain View High School in Bend in July of 2016. So ... I went straight into teaching after I graduated,” Brentano said.

She teaches a variety of subjects for 9-12th graders such as animal science, plant science, vet science, introduction to agricul-

ture courses and agricultural leadership.

Brentano’s advice to college students is to take advantage of all the opportunities available in college. “You never know when it might teach you a new skill, [help you] meet new people, or just create memories. I always tell kids to stop being in such a hurry to grow up. Being a student has so many built-in activities that are harder to come by when you’re navigating adult life. So have fun and go out of your comfort zone while you can!”

Mark Bigej

Co-owner and chief of operations, Al's Garden & Home

Oregon State University, 1994, BS in Horticulture

As a child, **Al's Garden & Home** co-owner and Chief of Operations Mark Bigej loved going to work with his father, Jack.

“Dad always kept all of us kids very involved in the business,” he said. “I loved going to work with Dad. He took us into

the store frequently where we always got to see our grandparents. Either Grandma or Grandpa was always there.”

“Dad always found jobs for us, too, so there was always work to be done and the ability to earn money. We learned at a young age how to run the cash register, sort fruit, sweep floors, weed the nursery and set plants down in straight rows. Dad also started a small container yard at home for Mom and us kids to grow 1–3 gallons. I’ll just say we never lacked for something to do!”

“Growing up I always knew that was what I wanted to do. Being in the family business was all I knew and I never wanted to do anything else. I remember taking a survey in class as a freshman in high school that was supposed to suggest a possible career path for you based on your answers. I answered the questions trying to get the survey to suggest I should be a nurseryman. I think it suggested I should be a garbage man, so not the result

I was looking for, but I already knew what I wanted to do.”

“Dad was very involved in the Oregon Association of Nurseries when I was in high school and preparing for college, so I was lucky enough to be aware of the scholarships and knew to apply,” Bigej said.

As if that wasn’t enough, his dad handed him the application. “Dad said fill this out.”

“In order to pay for college, Mom and Dad started ‘The Little Big E Nursery’ which was a small can yard with my Mom, my three sisters and I being the entirety of the workforce,” Bigej said. “The sole purpose of this nursery was for us kids to earn enough money to pay for college. With us having to earn our college tuition, every scholarship and aid opportunity helped immensely.”

The scholarship and his classes confirmed his path for the nursery industry. “My favorite classes in college were my

horticulture classes. Courses like plant ID, greenhouse management, plug production and research with professors all confirmed my career choice was the right one.”

“Following in my Dad’s footsteps and giving back to the nursery industry, and the OAN specifically, is very rewarding,” Bigej said. “I have learned, and continue to learn, so much from people within the industry. Our business wouldn’t be the place it is without the guidance and support of the great people of the OAN.”

If someone was to ask Bigej what one piece of advice he would have, “I would say to take every opportunity to be involved at your school,” he said. “Whether it’s activity groups, leadership, intermural sports, faith groups, or interest clubs, be active. School is about a lot more than what you learn in classes. The experiences you have, people you meet and relationships you build all have a

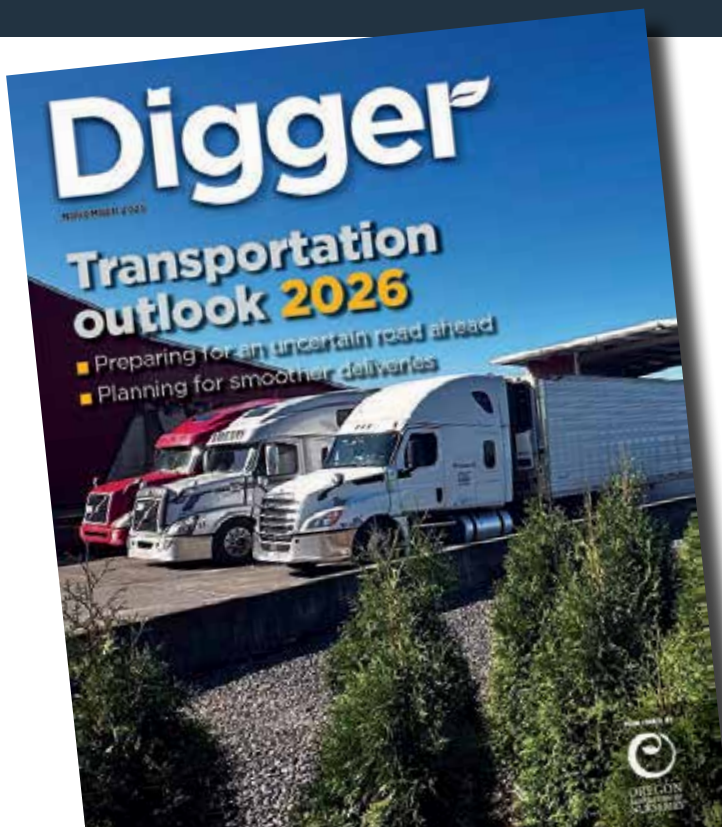
huge impact on forming who you are and will be for the rest of your life.”

When his dad Jack passed away a few years ago, the family endowed a scholarship in his name.

“Establishing a scholarship in honor of Dad was a very easy decision,” Bigej said. “Dad always had a passion for this industry and the people in it. Dad also loved helping people. He was a true entrepreneur at heart and loved to help other people pursue their dreams, take risks and succeed. We saw a scholarship as a way for Dad’s legacy of caring and sharing with the industry to continue.” ☺

Vic Panichkul is publications manager at the Oregon Association of Nurseries and managing editor and art director for Digger. Contact him at 503-582-2009 or VPanichkul@OAN.org.

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- Identify damaged, dead or obsolete plant material.
- Grade plant material for sales.
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Special skills/training:

- Proficiency with common data entry software such as Microsoft Excel, Google Sheets and inventory management systems (SAP, Oracle, Sage 100, Plant-X, etc.).
- Strong analytical and problem-solving skills.
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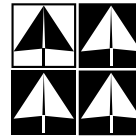
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GROWING KNOWLEDGE

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



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Smarter air blast spraying

Dr. Heping Zhu stands beside an early “Doc Ock” prototype of the Intelligent Sprayer System during field testing. With its conspicuous collection of hoses, wires, sensors, and controls, the experimental system helped demonstrate the potential for precision spraying in specialty crops. PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

What nearly two decades of intelligent sprayer research have taught us

BY LLOYD NACKLEY

One of my earliest field experiments after arriving at Oregon State University found me walking nursery rows with two people who knew far more about pest management than I did: nursery IPM specialist Robin Rosetta and plant pathologist Jay Pscheidt.

We were setting out small pieces of

yellow water-sensitive paper — tucking them deep inside branches, behind leaves, and into the difficult places where insects might hide or fungal diseases might develop. When spray droplets hit the cards, yellow turned to dark blue, giving us a simple way to see whether the spray had reached its target.

The cards were simple. The machine coming down the row was anything but. Hoses and wires seemed to emerge from everywhere. It was a research prototype, and it looked like one. Somewhere along the way, we started calling it Doc Ock, because to us it resembled the many-armed

Spider-Man villain Doctor Octopus.

But behind that ungainly machine was an elegant idea. Instead of driving through a nursery spraying every plant and every empty space at the same rate, what if the sprayer could actually see the crop in front of it? Could it recognize a large tree from a small one, adjust for differences in canopy density, and shut individual nozzles off when there was nothing there to spray?

From ‘What if?’ to ‘You can buy one’

The Intelligent Sprayer project began in 2009 under the leadership of USDA





The Red Robin, one of two Intelligent Sprayer research platforms developed and operated by Oregon State University, during field trials at a commercial Oregon nursery. Long-term partnerships with growers have been instrumental in moving intelligent spraying from experimental prototypes to practical commercial adoption. PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

Agricultural Research Service Agricultural Engineer Dr. Heping Zhu. Zhu and a large group of university, industry, and grower collaborators were trying to bring precision agriculture to specialty crops, where the targets can be remarkably complicated.

Think about a nursery row over the course of a growing season. A recently planted tree may have only a small canopy. A few months later, that same tree may be substantially larger. One cultivar may be narrow and upright while the next is broad and dense. There may be gaps between plants, missing trees, or large differences in foliage from the bottom to the top of the canopy.

A conventional air-blast sprayer doesn't recognize any of those differences. Once calibrated, it applies according to the settings we give it.

The intelligent sprayer system added another source of information: the plant itself. Using LiDAR (light detection and ranging), the system scans the crop as the tractor moves down the row. Those measurements describe the size, shape, and density of the canopy. The control system then uses that information to adjust individual nozzles in real time. More canopy can receive more spray. Smaller canopies

receive less. When there is a gap between plants, nozzles can shut off.

Today, that explanation doesn't sound especially futuristic. Nearly two decades ago, it did. Looking through old issues of *Digger* now is a little like flipping through a family photo album. The equipment changes. The questions change. Some familiar faces disappear and new ones arrive. But you can watch the idea mature almost year by year.

In November 2012, Robin, Heping, Sam Doane, and Derek Wells introduced *Digger* readers to the technology with a wonderfully simple question: What if a sprayer could "sense" when a plant was present?

A year later, *Digger* announced that a new version had arrived in Oregon. The earlier ultrasonic sensors had given way to more precise laser sensing, and prototypes were being tested in commercial nurseries, including Hans Nelson & Sons and J. Frank Schmidt & Son.

By 2015, Robin was writing about whether intelligent spraying could pass a much more important test: could we reduce pesticide use without sacrificing pest control? In 2017, the Oregon Association of Nurseries was calling the technology a potential "game changer."

And then, in 2018, came the headline researchers developing agricultural technology hope someday to see: *Smart sprayer becomes commercially available*.

In six years of *Digger* stories, the question had gone from "What if?" to "You can buy one."

Learning to spray less

One of the deceptively simple ideas behind intelligent spraying is that not every gallon leaving a sprayer is doing useful work.

Growers aren't spraying air, soil, or the gaps between trees because they want to. Those losses are partly a consequence of trying to deliver enough pesticide into complicated plant canopies to protect the crop. And using less material isn't an accomplishment if the result is more insects, more disease, or an unmarketable plant.

So the real question was never simply whether intelligent spraying could reduce spray volume. It was whether we could spray less and still grow the same healthy crop.

Answering that required years of experiments across different crops, pests, diseases, canopy sizes, and production systems. It also required commercial nurseries willing to let researchers bring prototypes



USDA-ARS researchers fine-tune a newer generation of the Intelligent Sprayer System, retrofitted onto a conventional air-blast sprayer. The retrofit uses LiDAR technology to detect plant canopies and control individual nozzles, adjusting spray applications as the sprayer moves through the crop. PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

onto their farms and find out whether an idea that worked on paper could survive the messiness of actual production.

Dan and Jesse Nelson at Hans Nelson & Sons have been among the project's longest-standing Oregon partners. Their nursery became a place where prototypes could be tested, adjusted, demonstrated, and tested again. Many other Oregon growers have participated over the years as well, providing something researchers can't reproduce at an experiment station: the complicated reality of a working nursery.

Gradually, the evidence accumulated. Across specialty crops, intelligent spraying has maintained effective pest and disease control while substantially reducing spray volume and off-target losses.

In our work, variable-rate spraying applied 67–74% less volume in orchard systems and 61–80% less in vineyards than conventional applications. Other research has documented reductions in airborne drift of up to 87% and ground losses of up to 90%.

Those numbers are impressive, but I think the more intuitive way to understand the technology is that more of what is sprayed is being directed toward the target rather than the spaces around it.

Efficiency becomes economics

Eventually, every promising agricultural technology runs into another important question:

Does it pay? An economic analysis from Ohio provided one useful example. Researchers comparing conventional constant-rate spraying with retrofitted variable-rate spraying in apple orchards estimated annual savings of approximately \$574–\$708 per acre.

Those estimates didn't include the potential value of reduced drift, ground losses, or fuel use. At the scale of a commercial operation, those savings can add up quickly.

At North Willamette Research and Extension Center, Bruce Sorte, Oregon State University economist, took the thought experiment one step further and asked what relatively modest production savings could mean across Oregon agriculture. Crops potentially suited to variable-rate spraying account for more than \$1.75 billion in sales in our seven-county region.

In one economic scenario, we assumed only a 5% reduction in production costs, adoption on half of applicable production, and reinvestment of those savings back into the operations. The poten-

tial regional economic impact exceeded \$77 million.

That doesn't mean intelligent sprayers have already put \$77 million into growers' pockets. Rather, it demonstrates something more useful: even relatively small improvements in efficiency become consequential when multiplied across a large specialty crop industry.

And the savings aren't only measured in dollars.

Less material leaving the sprayer means less potential for drift, less pesticide reaching the ground, less carrier water being hauled through the field, and less wasted product. The economic and environmental benefits aren't competing outcomes. In this case, they come from the same basic idea: put the material where the plant is.

The project grew more than a sprayer

Maybe the easiest way for me to appreciate how much time has passed isn't to look at the equipment at all. It's to look at the people.

Robin and Jay, who were beside me during those early Oregon experiments, have since retired. Brent Warneke joined our program as an M.S. student and has



Growing Knowledge

since earned his Ph.D. Brian Hill arrived as an M.S. student and went on to spend five years with us as a research assistant. Dr. Melissa Scherr brought her expertise as a postdoctoral entomologist and is now teaching at Linn-Benton Community College.

The same thing has happened across the larger collaboration. At the University of Tennessee, professor Amy Fulcher has continued advancing intelligent spraying while training another generation of researchers, including M.S. graduate Lauren Fessler Mathews.

At USDA-ARS, Adam Clark continues the engineering work alongside Heping Zhu, whose leadership has kept researchers, growers, universities, and industry partners working on the same problem across crops and across the country.

Somewhere along the way, a project designed to develop an intelligent sprayer also developed next-generation scientists. That's an important part of the return from sustained agricultural research, even if it doesn't fit neatly into a graph of pesticide savings.

Federal investment, through the USDA-ARS *Integration of Intelligent Spray Technology into IPM Programs in Specialty Crop Production* (USDA-ARS Project Number 58-5082-2-010) provided more than equipment. It has also supported graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, experiments, Extension demonstrations, grower partnerships, and years of accumulated knowledge about how precision spraying actually works.

When 'innovative' becomes ordinary

Today, intelligent spraying has entered a very different phase. Commercial systems are demonstrated at agricultural expos. Smart Apply Systems and equipment dealers such as Papé Machinery bring systems directly to growers, and Oregon State continues to evaluate and demonstrate the technology.

The crops have expanded too. Intelligent spraying systems have been tested and adopted in nurseries, apples, grapes, citrus, pecans, and other specialty crops.

Here in Oregon, we're seeing growing interest in young hazelnut orchards, where



Oregon State University researchers tuck yellow water-sensitive spray cards deep within the canopy of nursery shade trees. The cards change colour when struck by spray droplets, allowing researchers to evaluate whether applications reach difficult areas where insects and plant pathogens may be found. PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

small developing canopies separated by considerable empty space make the logic of variable-rate spraying particularly easy to see.

Some larger orchard and vineyard operations now run fleets of intelligent sprayer systems. Perhaps that's the clearest

evidence of how far the idea has come.

Nearly 20 years ago, researchers were asking whether a sprayer could detect a plant. A decade ago, I was standing in an Oregon nursery with Robin and Jay, tucking yellow cards behind maple leaves while

an ungainly prototype covered in hoses and wires worked its way toward us.

Today, growers can walk into an agricultural equipment demonstration and watch a commercial version do essentially what those early researchers imagined.

That doesn't happen just because someone has a good idea. Agricultural innovation is slower and more communal than that. It takes engineers willing to build prototypes, growers willing to test them, scientists willing to repeat experiments, students willing to spend long days collecting data, public agencies willing to sustain research, and eventually commercial partners willing to turn a promising technology into equipment that has to work on Monday morning when a grower needs to spray.

In 2012, a *Digger* article like this one asked whether a sprayer could sense the plant in front of it and apply only what was needed. Nearly two decades of research have moved us beyond that question. Today, intelligent sprayer systems are working in commercial nurseries, orchards, and vineyards, and we're asking what else those sensors can tell us.

Can the same LiDAR that guides a spray application also count trees, measure their growth, and help growers make better irrigation and fertilizer decisions? Can we combine information about the crop and soil to manage individual blocks more precisely? And, increasingly, can autonomous tractors do some of this work while keeping people farther away from pesticide applications?

Twenty years ago, Dr. Zhu and others set out to build a more intelligent sprayer system. Today, we're asking whether the intelligence riding through the nursery can help us manage even more than spraying. ©

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Why your voice is essential

Your membership in the Oregon Association of Nurseries is more than a plaque on the wall or a yearly renewal notice.

It is an invitation to become part of a community whose purpose is to help every member grow — professionally, personally, and collectively. A trade association exists to create opportunities that no single business can create alone.

It is easy to think of membership as the monthly publication that arrives in your mailbox, discounted registration for events, or access to valuable resources. But the true strength of the association has never been found in its office, its board of directors, or its staff. Its greatest asset has always been its members.

Membership opens the door. Engagement is what transforms that membership into something truly valuable.

Every member matters

The nursery industry has always advanced because people chose to invest more than their annual dues. They invested their knowledge, experience, curiosity, and willingness to help others succeed.

Whether you are looking for new production ideas, better business practices, emerging research, or simply a trusted network of peers who understand the unique challenges of growing plants, the association provides the place where those conversations happen.

The generations before us built an organization that has weathered changing markets, labor challenges, pests, economic uncertainty, and countless industry shifts. They understood something that remains true today: the strongest businesses are rarely the ones that operate in isolation. They are the ones connected to a network of people willing to share ideas, solve problems together, and support one another.

Fortunately, engagement does not require serving as president or sitting on

every committee. Every member contributes in different ways.

Sometimes engagement means mentoring a young professional entering the industry. Sometimes it means participating in a research project, attending a chapter meeting, welcoming a first-time attendee at an event, or opening your nursery for a tour. It can be as simple as asking a thoughtful question during an educational session or sharing a lesson learned from your own experience.

Even a few hours each year can strengthen both your business and the industry as a whole.

Investing in relationships

One of the most valuable benefits of association membership can never be printed in a brochure. It is the relationships.

Some of the industry's best ideas have been exchanged over coffee before a meeting, during conversations on the trade show floor, while touring another nursery, or after an educational session when someone stayed behind to continue the discussion.

Those moments create something larger than networking. They build trust. They create friendships. They establish the kind of professional relationships that often lead to new customers, trusted suppliers, collaborative solutions, and lifelong mentors.

Every member brings a unique perspective. No matter how long you have been in the industry, there is always something new to learn from someone else's success — or even their mistakes.

The diversity of our membership has always been one of our greatest strengths. Large operations and small family businesses, growers, retailers, suppliers, landscapers, researchers, and educators all contribute to a community where everyone benefits from sharing knowledge.

Building the next generation

Every successful industry depends on people who are willing to invest in those who follow them.

Today's young professionals are tomorrow's nursery owners, managers, researchers, and community leaders. The



Jeff Stone

experiences they have today — whether through a committee meeting, a professional development event, or simply being welcomed into a conversation — will shape the future of our industry.

Likewise, seasoned professionals have an opportunity to leave a lasting legacy by sharing the lessons they have learned over decades of experience. Knowledge grows in value when it is passed along.

That exchange of ideas between generations is one of the greatest strengths of an engaged association.

The real return on membership

The OAN belongs to every member. Its future is not determined by a handful of leaders, but by hundreds of members who choose to participate.

When members become engaged, everyone benefits. New ideas spread faster. Challenges become easier to solve. Businesses become stronger. Friendships deepen. The industry becomes more resilient.

That is the real return on membership. The invitation is simple.

Don't just belong to the association. Become part of its community. Attend the meeting. Volunteer when you can. Introduce yourself to someone new. Share what you've learned and be willing to learn from others.

If you're not sure where to begin, simply reach out to the OAN staff. We'd be happy to help you find opportunities that match your interests, experience, and available time. .

The more you invest in this community, the more it will invest in you — and together, we will continue building an industry that grows stronger with every generation. ©

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