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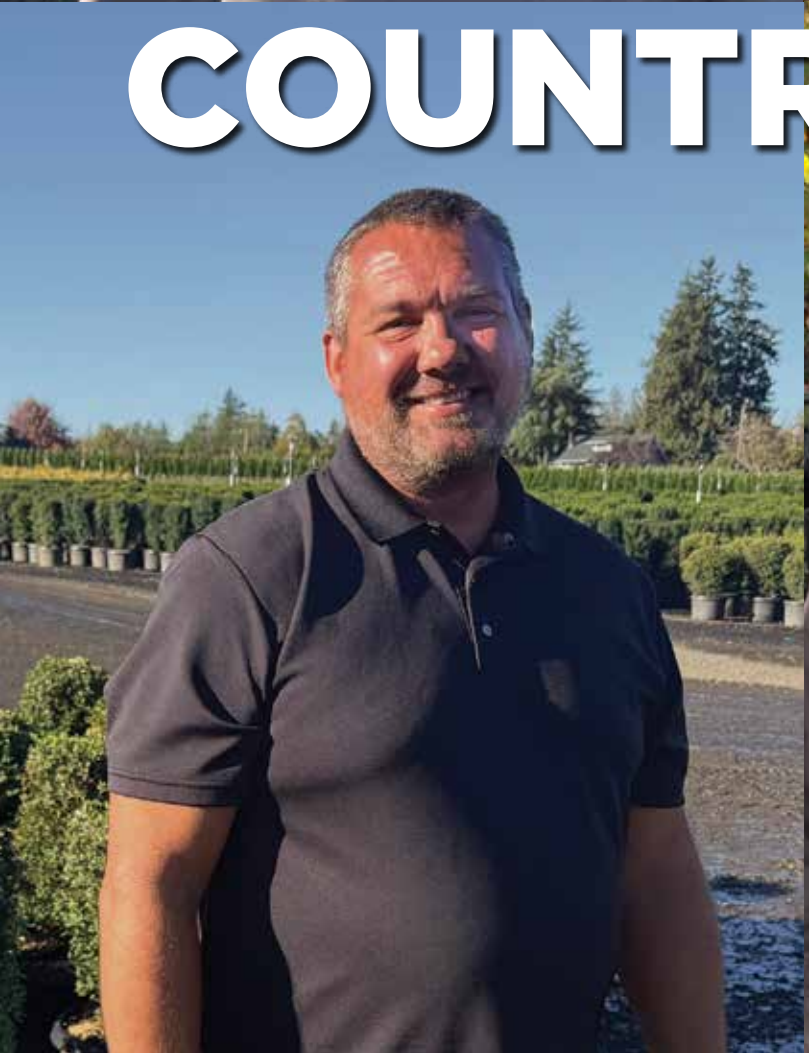
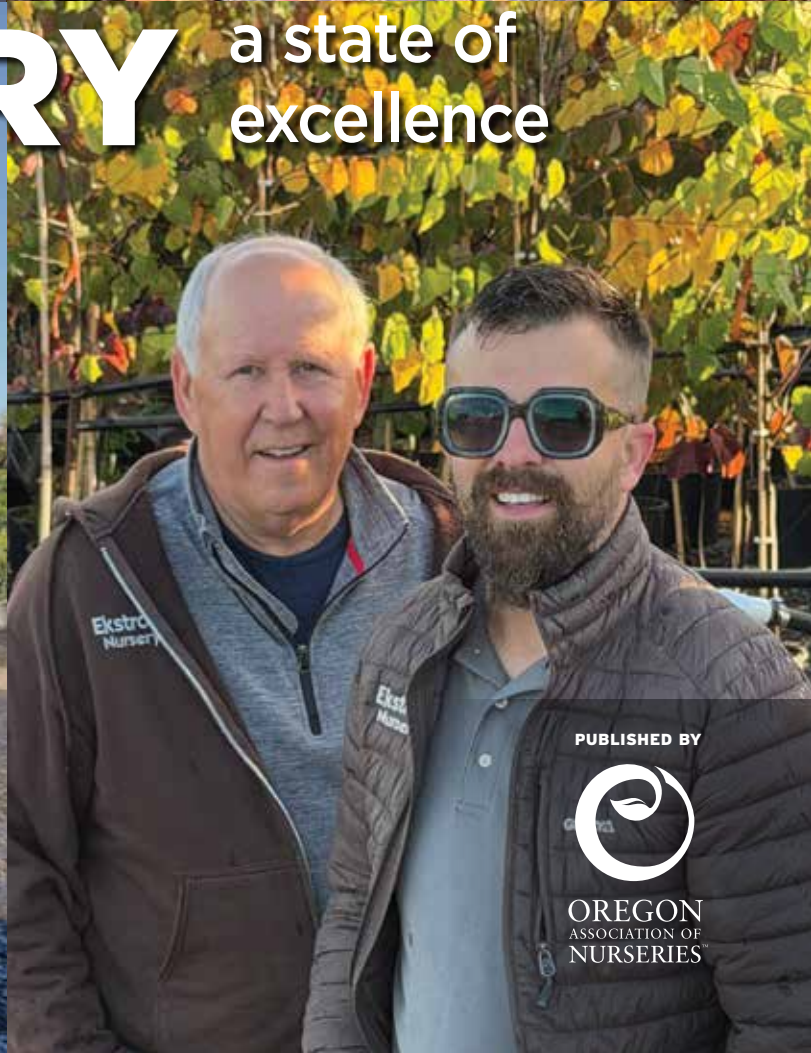
Oregon is NURSERY COUNTRY

Four growers who epitomize a state of excellence





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Scott Ekstrom (right) has taken the reins of Ekstrom Nursery Inc. from his father Don and is the third generation to run it. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUKL

Ekstrom Nursery Inc.

Quality, value, variety and a love of farming are keys for three generations of success

BY MITCH LIES

AT A GLANCE

Founded: 1987
Owners: Scott and Shelby Ekstrom and Don and Rebecca Ekstrom
Known for Dogwoods and maples
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For **Ekstrom Nursery Inc.**, it all comes down to following the philosophy of Carl Ekstrom, grandfather to today's farm owner Scott Ekstrom, and father to Don Ekstrom, who owned the nursery for many years and still works there.

"Grandpa's philosophy was if your customer makes a dollar, you'll always have a customer," Scott said. "And that's back when the dollar was worth something."

The time-honored tradition has held the Ekstroms in good stead. "We have a lot of loyal customers who have been with us a long time and who still buy from us today," Don said.

The family started farming on its site in Gresham, Oregon, in the early 1900s, growing mostly row crops, including cabbage, potatoes and berries, before switching to nursery crops in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The transition started slowly. "We planted a half-acre of Tam junipers, Ellwoodii cypress and pyramids," Don said. "We would pick up 30, 40 plants and deliver them to the grocery stores for a dollar and a quarter. And it was all B&B. We made burlap sacks out of potato sacks."

Today, the nursery grows trees and shrubs on 220 acres, amid an urban sprawl that surrounds its operation. It specializes in dogwoods and maples, while maintaining a wide variety of plant material.

Its 2026–27 catalog, for example, includes 32 maple varieties, 18 dogwood varieties and 20 magnolias among a total of 190 different offerings. The wide variety helps the nursery meet the needs of small and large customers.

"We have one customer in Washington who takes about five pages of material from us," Scott said. "He gets »

Workers stake newly-planted conifers at Ekstrom Nursery, which encompasses 220 acres. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUKL

five of this, five of that, two of this, three of that. It's a hard order to pull, but we appreciate this long-time customer.

"Most garden centers aren't going to want 50 of anything, unless it's a hedge plant. If you're getting a lace leaf or pink dogwood, then you need one pink dogwood, you need one lace leaf, and that is the kind of product we sell."

Newer varieties

Within Ekstrom's catalog, one can see many popular varieties, but the nursery also regularly experiments with new varieties. Some of these take off, and some go by the wayside after a growth cycle.

"There are always new varieties we are adding, cutting-edge type things," Don said. "We start out with pretty small numbers, and then we test the market. We'll try to evaluate its popularity based on our customers' ordering. Our motto is quality, value and variety."

Their emphasis on variety also extends to the diversity of markets that it sells into, a strategy that has helped the nursery weather market downturns.

"When the South is in recession and the North is banging, we have North customers," Scott said. "When the North is suffering and the South is banging, we have South customers."

"We've weathered a lot of downturns over many years," Don said.



Ignacio Ruiz loads and stakes newly-potted evergreens. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUKL

The nursery also has a large presence on the West Coast, including in California and British Columbia, and on the East Coast, where it ships to several customers each year, Scott added.



Over the years, the rural farmland near Ekstrom Nursery has been developed, and now the nursery is surrounded by homes.. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

Production cycle

Ekstrom's production cycle is primarily based around trees and shrubs that it can produce in three to seven years. "We don't grow the 8-foot, 12-foot tree for 12 years," Scott said. "There is one variety that we could have for eight or nine years, but typically six or seven years is our longest production cycle."

He added that the shorter production cycle fits with the nursery's strategy of delivering plants to retailers that a customer can fit in the back of their car or easily lift into a truck. "The customer doesn't want to come back and grab a 200-pound tree," Scott said. "They want to grab a 50-, 60- or 80-pound tree, not a monster."

The nursery started shifting to containers a dozen years ago, again to accommodate customer needs.

"A lot of our customers want things in containers and now we do thousands of trees in containers," Scott said. "We'll bare-root it, put it in a container and then sell it the next year, hopefully."

He added that other than caring for plants, the process involves minimal touches. "I'll turn a plant, put it in the ground, pop it out of the ground and touch it one more time to ship the pot," Scott said.

Love of farming

While it is hard to quantify the value that a love of farming adds to an opera- »

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tion, the Ekstroms believe that one of the keys to their success is the enjoyment that each generation has brought to the nursery.

Don taught at the local middle school for 10 years from 1974 to 1983, but he worked at the nursery during weekends, Christmas, spring break and summers. He still loves coming to work.

"In 1984, my dad said either you retire from teaching or we're going to hire somebody," Don said. "So I quit teaching and we (his father, Carl, Don and his brother Jim) went from 60 acres to at one point over 300 acres."

Scott, conversely, has always worked on the farm and has long strived to be a better farmer.

"I've been in the nursery since I was 12 years old, stacking and nesting pots, and I knew from the age of 17 that I wanted to be a farmer," Scott said. "Over the last 20 years, I've invested a lot, with going to college, taking ag classes and working on becoming a better farmer."

Among Scott's efforts was a four-and-a-half month stint living in Mexico. He did this to immerse himself in Spanish to better communicate with his work crew. It worked. "There were only five people in the whole town that spoke English, so it was either sink or swim," he said.

In efforts to improve employee relations, the nursery also provides workers a site for a community garden, where they can grow their own fruits and vegetables. The nursery also hosts fun events for workers during holidays. These efforts that have resulted in improved efficiencies on the farm through better worker retention.

"There are multiple guys on the farm that have been with me or been with my dad since I was three years old," said Scott, who is 40.

Scott also brings a do-it-yourself talent to the operation that has helped the farm cut costs and improve efficiencies, including revamping sprayers and tractors to help meet the nursery's unique needs.

And the nursery has benefited from Don's longtime participation in the International Plant Propagators Society (IPPS). "I learned a lot of things from a lot of different people (in the IPPS)," he said. "People were very open about sharing information, and I made some great connections with marvelous people."

Promising future

Looking ahead, the Ekstroms believe that despite some downward market pressures, the nursery industry will continue to thrive into the future. They think the future will particularly favor those operations that produce a wide variety of plants at value.

"Right now, the kinds of houses they're building don't have much room for landscaping," Don said. "So, for the most part, you're looking for columnar trees, you're looking at flowering shrubs and plants, flowering small trees, and medium-sized trees. If you're going to get one tree, you want a beautiful tree."

"And there are still a lot of plants that need to be produced in the field," Scott said, "because they do better in the field. They get caliper and they seem to perform better, because they're going to be in the field eventually. They're going to go back to the field in somebody's yard."

"And so, we're optimistic about the future," Don said. "We always think that people and plants go together. And I think people love flowering plants. There is kind of a spirit of excitement seeing things grow."

"We might need technology in our fast-paced world," Scott added, "but people find peace in the garden. I view that as job security."

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