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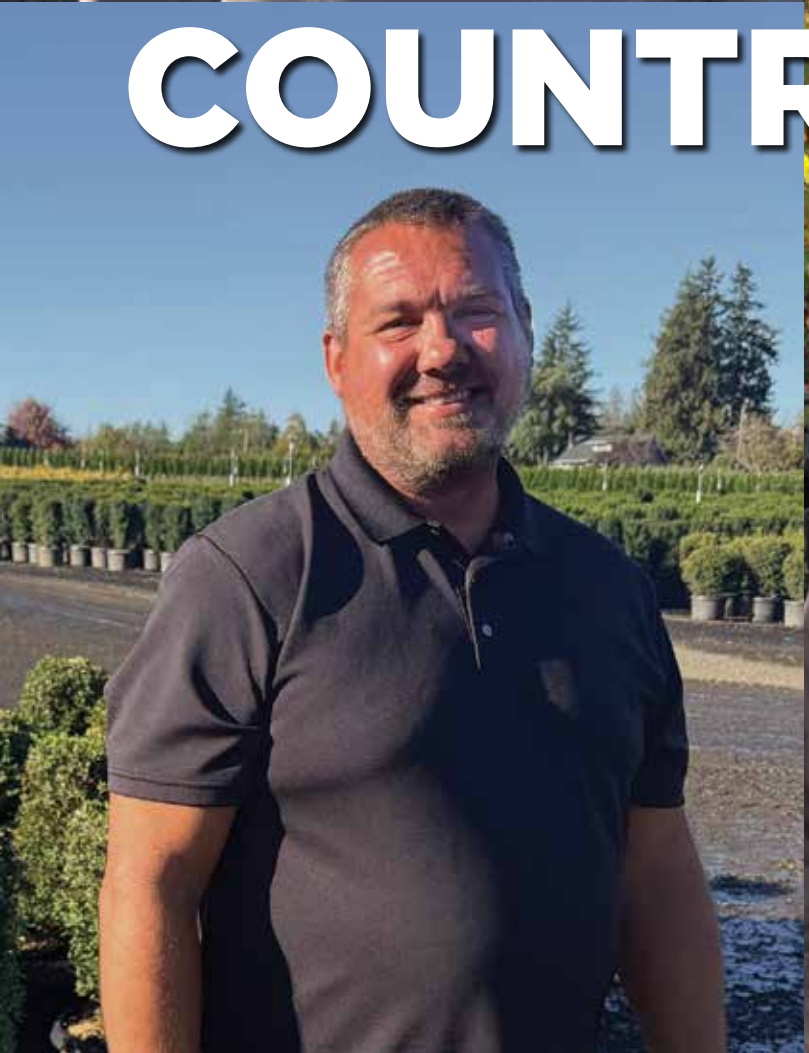

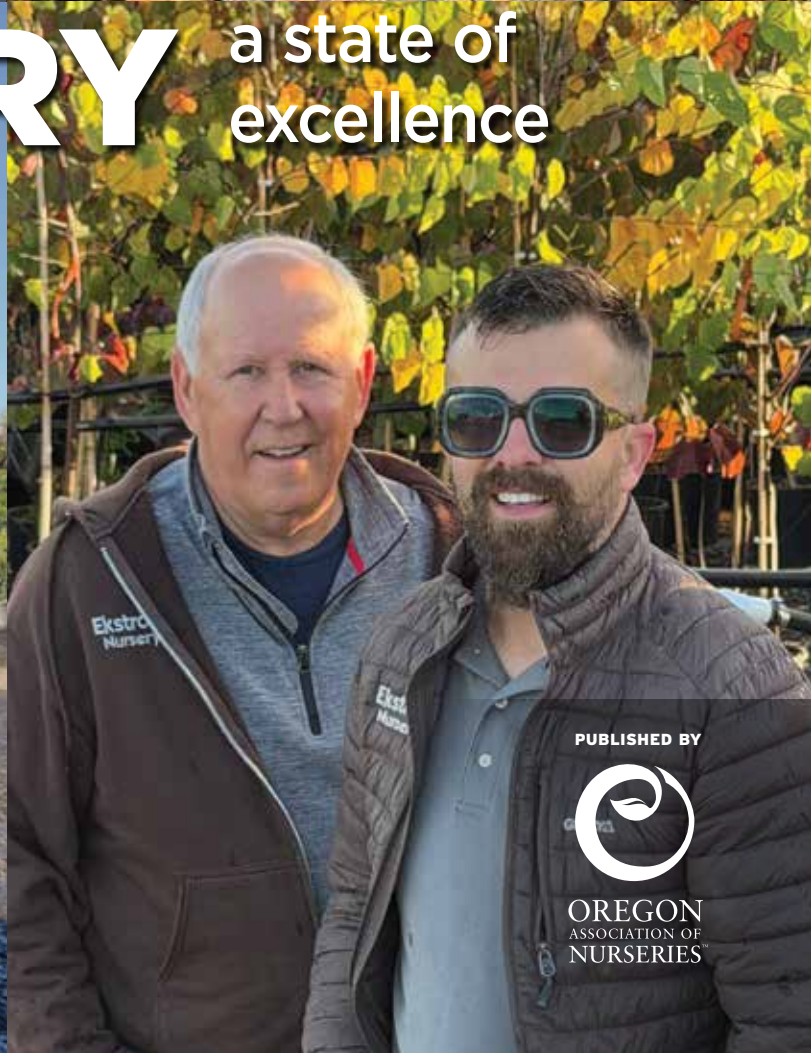

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Linda Eshraghi's nursery has grown to 500 acres and is known for grafted conifers and Japanese maples. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

Eshraghi Nurseries

Market demand has led to specialization in grafted conifers and Japanese maples

BY JON BELL

Over the years, thanks to Linda Eshraghi's early work in propagation, **Eshraghi Nurseries** grew and became a specialist in the kinds of grafted conifers and Japanese maples that were popular for home and city landscaping in the '80s.

Back then, homes often had larger yards and people wanted the kinds of trees that Eshraghi produced.

Today, Eshraghi spans 500 acres and produces more than 120 varieties of Japanese maples, along with an array of other maples, including vine, paperbark, full moon and more. Some of the nursery's specialty grafted conifers include *Pinus*, *Cedrus* and *Chamaecyparis*.

Though Eshraghi said she never really started out to specialize in maples and conifers, market demand led her in that direction — and the conditions she created at the nursery provided support. Eshraghi focuses on "cleanliness and orderliness" in everything it does, from grafting and field production to its can yards.

And while the nursery is known for maples and conifers, it does offer other staples like arborvitae, azaleas, hydrangeas and many others. Eshraghi said she's open to adding new plants as well.

"There's always new varieties coming out," she says, "so we're always keeping an eye out for the next new shiny thing."

AT A GLANCE

Founded: 1989
Owner: Linda Eshraghi
Known for: Conifers and a wide range of Japanese and other maples.
Contact: 26985 SW Farmington Rd., Hillsboro
Email: linda@eshraghinursery.com
Online: Eshraghinursery.com
NurseryGuide.com: 148 listings

Getting her start

It was 1978, and Eshraghi was just getting her feet wet in the nursery business.

Twenty-two at the time, Eshraghi had grown up around plants. She had two sets of grandparents. One set, her "city grandparents," had a beautifully landscaped yard and raised roses and African violets. The other were farmers who grew half of what they ate on a two-acre vegetable garden. Their farm also had trees and shrubs of all kinds. It was where Eshraghi first learned about things like crop timing, planting, harvest and food preservation.

"As a child, I loved being there," she said.

That early love for plants led »



Workers at Eshraghi Nurseries man a custom-made planter towed by a tractor. It digs rows in the dirt and allows seated workers to drop plants in them, while others following behind cover them up with soil. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

Eshraghi to a summertime job in high school at Oregon Roses, which grew roses and an array of greenery for the floral industry.

"I think that's where I got the bug for all things growing," she said.

That bug stayed with her, and after high school, Eshraghi found herself in 1978 starting a job at Glenn Walters Nursery in Cornelius, a renowned Oregon nursery that flourished for decades under owners Glenn and Viola Walters. At the time, all the women who worked at Glenn Walters worked in propagation, but Eshraghi started out in the field.

"I was sent out to a 300-acre farm with 300 guys," she said. "Oh my gosh, and I was blonde and blue eyes. Tell you what, I caused a bit of a stir with those boys."

Lucky for Eshraghi, she also caught the attention of Viola, who was known for her teaching abilities and trained scores of employees at the nursery. Eshraghi benefitted from that — and it paved the way for a long and fruitful life in the nursery industry.

"Viola would lead me through those fields walking as fast as she could, and I was running behind writing notes," Eshraghi said. "She would be saying, 'I want to do this, I want to do that' and showing me how to do this and how to do that. Eventually I moved up through the nursery and all its departments, and I got to be in propagation. I did not go to school for it. I just learned the hard way. The school of hard knocks with Glenn and Viola."

Getting started

Eshraghi spent about eight years working at Glenn Walters, learning the ins and outs of the business, from planting and digging to loading trucks and propagation. She left and pieced a few endeavors together — her own Christmas-related business, some landscaping, time as an estimator and a shipping season at **Monrovia Nursery Company** — before deciding to start her own nursery.

She started a small nursery products brokerage in Gaston, where she also made cuttings and grafts for other nurseries, before moving to 5 acres on Southwest Farmington Road.

"I just figured, well, why not?" Eshraghi said. "I pulled the trigger."

At first, the nursery didn't start out with any kind of a specialty. That, Eshraghi said, changed pretty quickly.

"My first goal was to grow plants that Linda liked, which I soon found out was the wrong thing to do," Eshraghi said.

What she liked at the time were flowering shrubs, heather and similar plants.

"You have to grow what the people want, not what I want," she said. "So we started to build more of a mix. We'd always been grafting conifers and maples, so that's been a staple all along, but the varieties just kept growing and we kept expanding. It just really wasn't planned. It just morphed into what it is."



Myra Bacerra propagates Japanese maples by grafting. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHUL

Retail realization

Though Eshraghi Nurseries started out as wholesale only, a few years into the endeavor, Eshraghi decided to make the leap into retail as well. The motivation came in part from her earlier connections with Glenn Walters Nursery.

Eshraghi and her team couldn't help but notice that cars seemed to continually come to Eshraghi Nurseries in search of Glenn Walters' retail spot, which was a five-acre plot not far away where excess inventory was sold.

"People were crazy about that place," Eshraghi said. "They were lined up all up and down the highway, hundreds of cars each weekend."

The thing is, the maps Glenn Walters Nursery put out for the retail location routed traffic right alongside Eshraghi Nurseries.

"Their advertising brought people right past my place," Eshraghi said. "At one point, I was like, 'This is just stupid. I guess they want to give us money, so let's do it."

Eshraghi opened Farmington Gardens, a retail garden center, five years after starting her nursery. It did well, in part because people in the area were buying homes with large yards that needed landscaping. Having all the traffic in the area for the Glenn Walters Nursery didn't hurt either.

"Funny enough, when they closed, I don't know how many years after we opened, they had a big auction, and Glenn Walters told my husband, 'You guys put me out of business,'" Eshraghi said. "We didn't. But it is a good story."

Changing times

Over the decades since Eshraghi first opened, times and trends have changed. She said Midwesterners still have bigger yards and like to landscape with the conifers and maples that Eshraghi specializes in. The East Coast and the West Coast, however, are different these days.

"It's very condensed living," Eshraghi said, "and people don't have time to garden, or if they do, it's on a lot smaller scale or else they just don't have the space."

Heeding her own axiom of growing what the customers want, Eshraghi said the nursery has been looking into growing plants that, at their finished size, are smaller. Since COVID, there's also been more of a focus on perennials, which people seem to appreciate. Not everyone's on the hunt for a tree that's going to grow 40 feet tall.

"With perennials, people don't feel like they're spending a fortune for something they might have to dig up in a couple years," Eshraghi said. "It's not as crucial as trying to dig up a big tree or established landscape plant. They're not as expensive as a longer-term shrub or tree, and they give you lots of enjoyment because there's a lot of color."

While Eshraghi has adapted for contemporary market demands, she said the nursery still focuses on its specialties, is always adding new varieties and hasn't cut back on them to make room for other plants.

"Oh gosh, we're not that disciplined yet," she said. "We're still growing. We still have vacant acreage to fill. It'll be filled by the end of next year." »



On the horizon

Getting through the next year will be a bit of a rocky road, not just for Eshraghi but for anyone in the nursery business. Eshraghi said perennial challenges like wages, immigration, overtime and severe weather have only heightened in the past several years.

Costs for everything from fertilizer to pots are currently through the roof, and skyrocketing freight rates chilled both the extended spring and fall shipping seasons this year.

"We expected our spring shipping to run through June, but the last few years, it's just stopped right after Mother's Day," Eshraghi said. "We ship probably 80% of our plant material to the East Coast, and to get a truck from here to there, the rates are close to double as they were before. So some customers just can't afford to bring West Coast material in, so they're sourcing it locally."

Even so, Eshraghi maintains an optimistic tone about her nearly 50 years in Oregon's nursery industry. She appreciates her employees and is grateful for her longtime customers.

"It's a very giving industry," Eshraghi said, "and the people involved are really good people."

Andrea Fields, sales director at Eshraghi, said the nursery's customers and employees are extremely loyal, and there's one primary reason behind that.

"I would attribute that to Linda," she said. "There's the push to always grow really good-quality plants and to treat her employees right. She's a great boss."

Eshraghi is also a boss who's got her eyes on the horizon. She turned 70 this year, and while she's not slowing down, she is prepping for retirement in the next three years.

Although there aren't any Eshraghis who will be taking over the business, she said she has been working toward an Employee Stock Ownership Plan, which will essentially sell the business to employees, making them owners. This plan will keep the upper management team in place to "refine, reset and realign the company so that it lives another 40-plus years."

As for Eshraghi, she sees her eventual retirement as a time to travel and enjoy her grandsons, who are currently 1 and 4. She also doesn't completely write off starting another new business, maybe even something else involving plants.

"I just have a passion for plants," Eshraghi said. "There's never a dull moment. If there's a dull moment, wait for the other shoe to fall. Always. It keeps you on your feet. That's why I'm so happy at 70."

Jon Bell is an Oregon freelance journalist who writes about everything from Mt. Hood and craft beer to real estate and the great outdoors. His website is **JBellInk.com**.



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