

Several recipients were honored at this year's President's Awards Banquet at the OAN Convention. Back row (l-r): Pete Brentano, Wendy Brentano, Beth Farmer, Brian Newton, JoEllen Newton, Steve Carlson, Roberta Simnitt, Jerry Simnitt, Bill Patterson, Chris Robinson, and Ben Verhoeven. Front row (l-r): Kristin VanHoose, David VanHoose, Elizabeth Brentano, Jaime Newton, Patrick Newton, Jeff Stone and emcee Kyle Fessler. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

OAN honors industry leaders

BY CURT KIPP

The annual Oregon Association of Nurseries Convention is where the industry honors the best of the best — and that's exactly what happened at the 2026 Presidential Awards Banquet, held Saturday, November 7 in the Great Lodge at Sunriver Resort in Central Oregon.

Kyle Fessler of **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas**, a past president of OAN in 2020–21, emceed the gathering. "Tonight, we're going to celebrate the family that is our industry and the people in it, who are remarkable in their service," Fessler said.

The award winners were as follows:

OAN Outstanding Service Award — Bill Patterson (Patterson Nursery Sales, Eagle Creek, Oregon). The award recognizes outstanding long-term service to the industry. Patterson recently retired after selling his tree brokering and growing operation, which specialized in specimen material, to Devil Mountain Wholesale Nursery.

Tom Fessler, owner of Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas and a past president of the OAN, presented the award. "Bill Patterson has been a pioneer in the industry," he said. "A blend of both buyer and seller, with a unique business model that has touched every corner of the industry."

Emerging Leader of the Year Award — Elizabeth Brentano (Brentano's Tree Farm, St. Paul, Oregon) The award recognizes outstanding service and leadership by someone relatively new to the industry trade. Brentano was recognized for co-founding the NexGen group and serving as president for two years.

Tyler Meskers (**Oregon Flowers Inc.**, Aurora) is a prior recipient of the Emerging Leader of the Year Award and presented it to Brentano. "Elizabeth's growth as a leader was on full display last year during the OAN Advocacy Training, and she subsequently was featured in *Nursery Management* maga- »

zine, March 2025, in their leading Women of Horticulture issue," he said. "Family means everything in this industry, and it is amazing to see how this leader is making a name for herself."

The Member Group of the Year Award — Government Relations Committee, chaired by Chris Robinson (Robinson Nursery Inc.). The award is presented each year to an outstanding committee, chapter or leadership group in the association. The Government Relations Committee was recognized for its work on the Japanese beetle issue this year, in particular.

Rod Park, owner of **Park's Wholesale Nursery** and a past president of the OAN, presented the award. "We never know what will befall us in any given year," he said. "What happens every time is that we fight for the industry. Things were bad, and there was no money to be had for funding the Oregon Department of Agriculture to conduct their Japanese beetle program."

The lack of funding threatened intrastate market access for the majority of Oregon growers. However, the GR Committee successfully fought for the Oregon Legislature to include the funding. "To put it mildly, their efforts saved many of our businesses," Park said.

Distinguished Member of the Horticultural Allied Trades Award — Marion Ag Service Inc., St. Paul, Oregon. The award is presented to an individual, group or company that is a service provider or supplier, and provides outstanding contributions to the nursery industry. Accepting the award on Marion Ag's behalf were owner John Hockett, research agronomist Steve Carlson and Chief Operating Officer Doug Grott.

Noah Fessler of **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas**, member at large of the OAN Executive Committee, presented the award. "Marion Ag has been serving farmers, nursery-greenhouse growers and wholesale fertilizer resellers for more than 50 years," he said. "When there is a problem, it is not hard to figure out who to call to get the best advice that is out there …. Everything around us is changing, and I appreciate their laser focus on technical services, soil health and nutrient delivery."

Clayton W. Hannon Distinguished Service Award — Patrick Newton, Powell's Nursery (Gaston, Oregon). The award honors a specific, notable contribution to the nursery and greenhouse industry. In a rare case of a current president receiving the award, Newton was selected for his advocacy work to restore state funding and pursue federal funding for Japanese beetle control and eradication in Oregon.

Kathy LeCompte, owner of Brooks Tree Farm and a past president of the OAN, presented the award. "[No challenges we've faced] was as seemingly hopeless as the situation of Gov. Kotek not funding the Japanese beetle program, and the all-too-real threat of our $1.3 billion industry losing over $800 million due to markets being shut off," she said. "The stress was worthy of night terrors, but Patrick newton stepped up and was a leader in the moment we needed him most …. Patrick was the man in the arena, and we would not be having a fun evening without his direct effort."

Darcy Ruef sworn in along with new OAN Board

BY CURT KIPP

Darcy Ruef — chief financial officer and a co-owner of retailer-grower **Al's Garden & Home** — was sworn in as the new Oregon Association of Nurseries president on November 7. This took place at the association's Annual Meeting, which was part of the annual OAN Convention, held at Sunriver Resort.

Ruef succeeded Patrick Newton of **Powell's Nursery**, who became immediate past president and will remain on the OAN Executive Committee one more year. Serving along with them on that committee will be president-elect Chris Robinson (**Robinson Nursery Inc.**), vice president Jesse Nelson (**Hans Nelson & Sons Nursery Inc.**), treasurer Tyler Meskers (**Oregon Flowers Inc.**), secretary Andrea Avila-Aragon (**Smith Gardens**), and, new to the committee, member-at-large Noah Fessler (**Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas Inc.**).

Joining them on the larger OAN Board of Directors for 2026–27 are Patrick Peterson (**OHP Inc.**), Greg Elwell, Sam Pohlschneider (**Pohlschneider Nursery**), Jason Burns (**Surface Nursery**), Sam Barkley (**J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.**), Vladimir Lomen (**Sester Farms**), Margie Barnett (**Margie's Farm & Garden**), Barb Iverson (**Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm**) and Josh Cady (**Monrovia Nursery Company**). Barnett (voted in) and Cady (appointed to a vacancy) are new members of the board; the others were already serving.

The association recognized outgoing board members Ben Verhoeven of **Peoria Gardens** and Blake Nelson of **Bountiful Farms Nursery Inc.**, who concluded their board service.



Darcy Ruef was sworn in as OAN president.
PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

Ruef co-owns Al's, along with siblings Mark Bigej and Dorothy Russo, and their mother Deanna Bigej. Mark Bigej is a past OAN president, as was their late father, Jack Bigej. Their grandfather, Al Bigej, founded the business that still bears his name.