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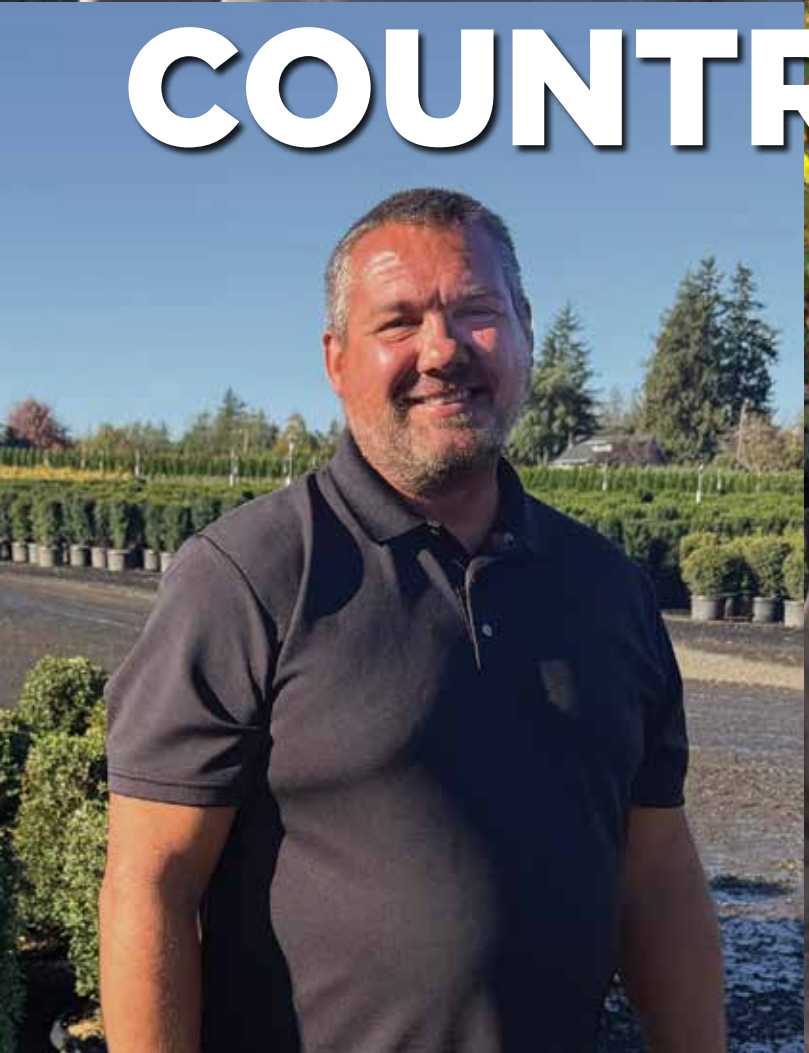
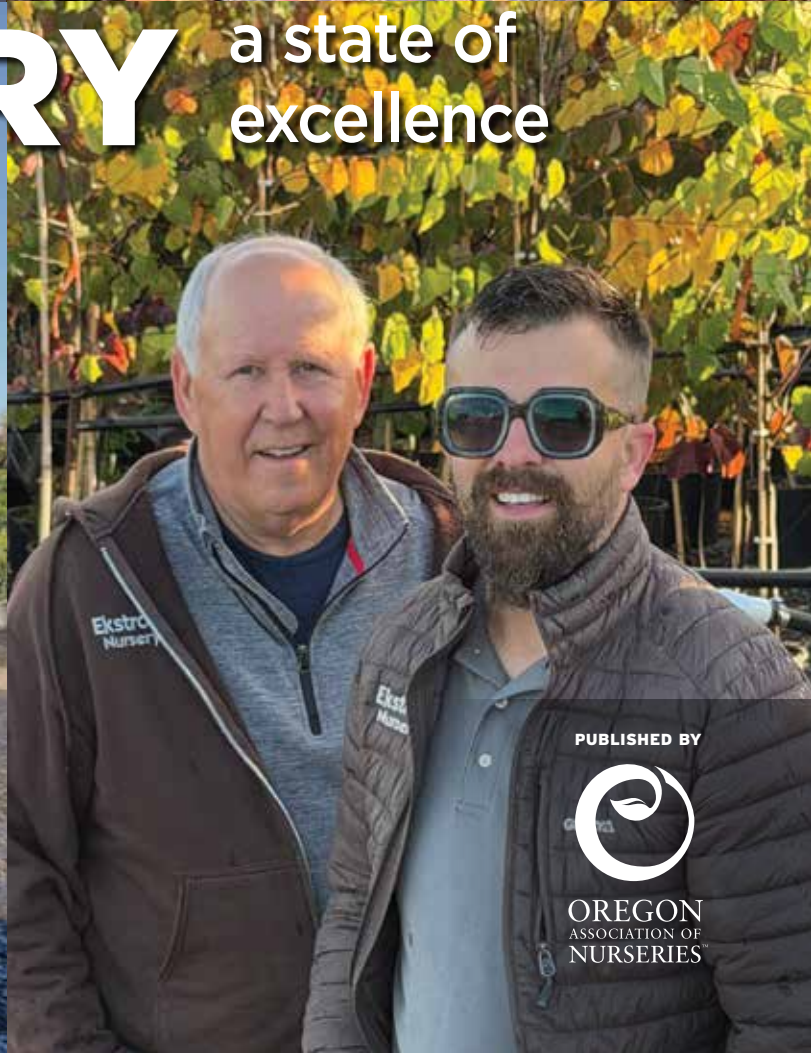
Oregon is NURSERY COUNTRY

Four growers who epitomize a state of excellence





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When Jason Hupp started Western Evergreen, he had no itention of it becoming known for specialty-grafted conifers. But after 25 years of development, rare specialty conifers have become Western Evergreen's everyday offering. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

Western Evergreen

Nursery builds a reputation on trialing and introducing rare and amazing conifers

BY JOSH LAPOINT

AT A GLANCE

Founded: 2001
Owners: Jason Hupp and Steffanie Hupp
Known for: Specialty grafted conifers
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NurseryGuide.com: 80 listings

Nestled in the hills of Silverton, Oregon, **Western Evergreen** specializes in selecting, trialing, and introducing rare, unusual and amazing grafted conifers. Founded by Jason and Steffanie Hupp in 2001, the nursery offers over 400 unique cultivars, with more than 1,400 items in various stages of production. The nursery supplies high-end garden centers from coast to coast.

Early lessons

Jason was 15 and his brother was 14 when their father, Don Hupp, passed away, leaving them 40 acres of Christmas trees. Much of the land was leased to another grower, but Jason began planting some of the empty acreage at age 16.

As he found his footing, his grandparents, Delbert and Barbara Hupp, founders of **Drakes Crossing Nursery**, also in Silverton, helped shape his work ethic. His uncle Jan Hupp, the current owner of Drakes Crossing, became a father figure after Don's passing. His aunt Kathy LeCompte, owner of **Brooks Tree Farm** in Brooks, Oregon, also offered guidance.

"All of them did a lot to encourage me and help me make wise choices at a young age," Jason said.

At 17, Jason sold the Toyota »



One of Hupp's unique pines, *Pinus strobiformis* [Snow Dragon] will be coming to market soon. PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN EVERGREEN



Teo Panzo stakes and ties young evergreens at Western Evergreen in Silverton, Oregon. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

pickup he had inherited from his father, gathered his savings, and boarded a Greyhound bus to San Diego with Steffanie, then his girlfriend, to buy a used BMW he had dreamed of owning.

His grandfather offered a wry observation: "You're going to have fun hauling fertilizer around with that."

A few weeks later, Jason sold the BMW and bought another pickup. Looking back, he acknowledged it "was the smarter choice, being 17 and having a small farm that was inherited."

Getting started

High school sweethearts Jason and Steffanie founded Western Evergreen in 2001 while engaged. That first year, they potted about 300 Colorado blue spruce and Austrian pine seedlings that they sourced from Drakes Crossing. Their initial planting was limited by the reach of a single sprinkler fed by their house well.

Jason sold the trees through newspaper classified ads and delivered them personally to local homeowners and also at farmers markets.

As he started growing nursery stock, Jason thought, "If I'm growing nursery stock, I should have things people use in landscapes," and started driving around neighborhoods to see what was being planted. He saw weeping Norway spruce and weeping blue atlas cedars in the new subdivisions and wondered how they were grown. That was the beginning of his lifelong passion for grafted conifers.

"I had started potting up understock," Jason said. "I had people who really needed understock and so I'd sell some as the seedling and then graft on some." This strategy enabled him to turn a profit while starting his production plan. He would even trade seedling deliveries to wholesale growers for nursery tours.

"The Oregon Association of Nurseries members did a lot to help me," Jason said. "They'd give me a tour and let me pick their brain. There were no trade secrets, just good advice and helpful encouragement."

After high school, Jason studied agriculture at Chemeketa Community College, but he credits other nurseries with providing much of his knowledge.

"I only did a few terms at Chemeketa, but stopped when I realized I could learn more from experience than in a classroom," Jason said. "I had a giant textbook on grafting with T-budding, chip budding, etc., but it's really about getting out there and doing it with people. I went to R&R Nursery and they said, 'You should come out this weekend, and we'll show you how,' so I worked for a couple hours with them, and they showed me how to graft ornamentals close to the ground."

Growth trajectory

Western Evergreen started to take off through marketing to local OAN members and Jason's consistent efforts to build relationships in the industry. "I eventually graduated from farmers markets and classified ads to a mailing list, which was all OAN members," Jason recalled. "I had a single sheet of thick paper with my availability on the front and back in small type, tri-folded, so I could put a stamp on it and mail it out to 100+ nurseries."

In 2013, Jason and Steffanie attended the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (MANTS) while Steffanie was pregnant with their youngest son, Cameron. The show introduced them to new garden center buyers and remains a



Another upcoming introduction is *Pinus pungens* [Fort Knox], a golden cultivar of Table Mountain pine. PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN EVERGREEN

core part of their marketing plan.

New introductions

The Hupp family has a long history of selecting interesting, unique plants.

Jason's grandmother, Barbara, founded Drakes Crossing with his grandfather. She did a lot of the selections in the seedbed and was the one to identify *Acer palmatum* 'Hupp's Dwarf', a slow-growing, compact Japanese maple cultivar. She also selected *Thuja plicata* 'Whipcord' from a seedling bed of arborvitae, which Iseli Nursery was able to introduce to the market.

"With the conifer world," Jason said, "the possibilities are endless. When you go through millions of plants, it's surprising if you don't find something interesting."

When he founded Western Evergreen, he had no intention of being a specialty grafted conifer grower. "The nursery just kind of evolved the way it did on its own," Jason said. "Business is like that. It isn't necessarily pushed in a certain direction; it just grows in the direction it wants to go."

Two introductions are coming to market from Western Evergreen in the next couple of years. *Pinus strobiformis* [Snow Dragon] — the name is provisional while patents are worked out — is a southwestern white pine with striking green-yellow-green needles reminiscent of dragon's eye pine. Its southwestern white pine characteristics allow it to grow in colder regions than some other pines.

Pinus pungens [Fort Knox], also provisionally named, is a strong-growing, golden cultivar of Table Mountain pine, a species native to the Appalachian Mountains. Aptly named, its needles are almost luminescent, and it thrives in full sun.

Some of the selections also carry personal meaning. *Abies procera* 'DelBar Cascade', with its form reminiscent of a weeping sequoia, honors his grandparents, Delbert and Barbara Hupp.

Other introductions carry that family tradition forward. The golden *Pinus strobiformis* 'Winter Sun Raye' carries part of Steffanie's middle name. Two selections bear their sons' names. *Picea sitchensis* 'Kaleb Hupp' is a miniature Sitka spruce with tiny needles and upward-arching branches, while *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Cameron's Golden Charm' is a narrow, upright Lawson cypress with soft golden branches. Their daughter Chloe is represented by *Pinus strobus* 'Blue Clovers', an eastern white pine with striking silvery-blue needles.

A garden-worthy collection

After 25 years of development, rare specialty conifers have become Western Evergreen's everyday offering. Meanwhile, they still keep common items like globe blue spruce and 'Vanderwolf's Pyramid' as novelty items, with 100 or so in production each year.

Western Evergreen's customers have come to rely on Jason and the team to fill a distinct niche in their retail product mix, with most products offered in retail-friendly sizes ranging from #1 to #10 containers.

Over time, they have phased out older cultivars like *Pinus strobus* 'Fastigiata' in favor of better performers like *Pinus strobus* 'Stowe Pillar', which is tighter and handles a snow load better. He looks for better cold hardiness, disease resistance, and varieties that have desirable traits such as a dwarf growth habit or fuller branching.

"There are so many things out there, so you have to find the thing that's dif- »

ferent and garden-worthy," Jason said.

Each new introduction has to look good and perform at a high level for many years for Western Evergreen to offer it to their customers. Selecting interesting cultivars is a years-long labor of love.

"Anything that's weird or different, I'll save it," Jason said. "Years later, I'll come by and see what it's looking like and if it still has promise. We take a few cuttings, give it a provisional name and number, then take grafts and plant them out to to see what they're doing. A lot of times, I've grafted something for 10–12 years before selling a single plant."

Customers first

The theme of Western Evergreen is that anything worth doing is worth taking the time to do right, and they carry that same care to their relationships with customers.

"We focus a lot on making things easier for the retailer," Jason said. "We have a low minimum order of $1,000 and are happy to do pre-priced custom tags free of charge. We concentrate on making sure every plant looks good for retail."

Western Evergreen prides itself on offering live availability on their website, as opposed to a booking list without quantities where a customer might get allocated down on their order. If the item is available, it's because they physically walked the farm, took inventory, and decided it was good quality to sell.

Future plans

While some nurseries focus on expansion, Western Evergreen has reached the perfect size for Jason's vision for the company. Their focus now is on continuous refinement. "I want to have my product line dialed in," Jason said, "so I'm on a perfect rotation with enough, but not too much." They're focused on fine-tuning their processes to be efficient and produce the highest-quality trees possible.

The teenager who once traded his pickup and savings for a BMW now has a clear vision of what he wants to grow and why. His father's acreage helped him get started, and his family's guidance helped him make the most of that opportunity.

Today, Jason takes a patient, deliberate approach to selecting and trialing conifers, sometimes spending more than a decade evaluating a selection before offering a single plant for sale. For Jason, the next chapter of Western Evergreen is measured in better plants and better growing practices, rather than more acres.

Joshua LaPoint owns Standard Nursery and has a passion for writing as well as plants. Contact him at **Josh@StandardNurseryCompany.com**.

