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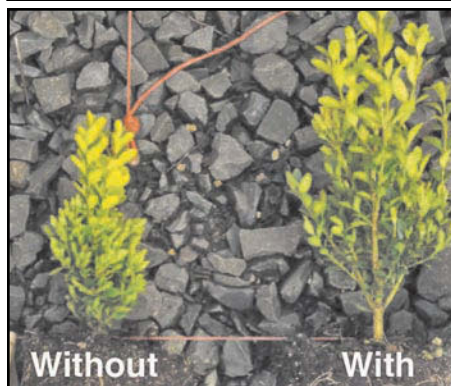
Nursery industry flowers at Al's Garden & Home in Woodburn, Ore.

Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press



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Uncertainty is nursery industry's new norm

By **PARIS ACHEN**

For the Capital Press

A year ago, Oregon's nursery industry was bracing for an economic downturn. While many of those fears never materialized, prolonged uncertainty has become the industry's new norm as nurseries look ahead.

The last 12 months have "been better than expected with all the headwinds that we're experiencing," said Jeff Stone, executive director and CEO of the Oregon Association of Nurseries.

But, as nurseries plan for the coming year, they are grappling with a mounting list of unknowns related to labor restrictions, trade, production costs, and public policy that are largely outside their control.

The industry still wears the crown as Oregon's largest agricultural commodity by value.

The state's nurseries generated about \$1.3 billion in sales in 2024, the latest figures available from the Oregon Department of Agriculture. They employ more



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, says the last 12 months have "been better than expected with all the headwinds that we're experiencing."

than 10,400 workers, provide \$487.4 million in annual payroll, and are represented by some 600 members of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, according to association statistics.

The state also trails only California and Florida as the largest nursery producers and leads the nation in sales of conifers, shade trees, Christmas trees, and flowering trees. About 74% of gross sales are shipped to customers outside Oregon, including other states and countries, predominantly Canada.

While sales have been stronger than expected over the past year, Stone said growers are facing pressure from multiple fronts.

Transportation costs have spiraled, fertilizer prices strain production budgets, and labor expenses keep skyrocketing, in part due to Oregon-specific labor policies.

"In the past, it feels like you'd have one of these challenges every four or five years," said Tyler Muskens, owner of Oregon Flowers in Aurora and an OAN board member. "Well, now they're coming at us every year, and there's not enough time in between to adapt the company to absorb some of these challenges and costs."

Because the state's nurseries compete nationally, growers often have little ability to raise prices enough to offset those increases without losing customers.

Customers once paid a premium for Oregon-grown nursery stock because of its superior quality, said Amanda Staehely, owner of Columbia Nursery in Canby, but hit with labor costs that far exceed competitors like Tennessee, growers are testing the limits of what buyers will pay.

"We're pricing ourselves out of that competition," she said.

Trade policy has also become less predictable. Canada continues to be Oregon's largest foreign customer, but Stone said some members have reported canceled orders as political tensions between the United States and Canada have fueled anti-American buying sentiment among consumers.

"It's something that's completely out of our control," Stone said.

But the main issue that nursery owners and growers are losing sleep over is Oregon's phased agricultural overtime law, he said. In the first phase in January 2025, the

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Industry

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agricultural overtime threshold dropped from 55 to 48 hours per week, a requirement of House Bill 4002.

Beginning on Jan. 1, 2027, the overtime threshold will drop again, from 48 to 40 hours per week. Many nursery operations cannot absorb those additional labor costs without trimming employee hours, Stone said. Unlike factory production, nursery work revolves around living plants that must be planted, pruned, watered, and shipped when conditions demand.

“We’re not a widget factory,” Stone said. “These are live plants.”

In response, more growers are investing in automation, expanding their use of the federal H-2A guest worker program, and choosing plants that require less manual labor over time.

Oregon Flowers bought one automated flower-processing line last year and is purchasing two more this year. Muskens said the company may add a robot next year to stack and move products.

“It just prompted us to buy more equipment and run less hours, so we’re just more efficient, faster,” he said.

Staehely described the latest phase of the overtime law as “dire” for growers. Columbia Nursery has responded by changing some of its product line, reducing some of its specialty plants such as rare dwarf conifers, which require hand watering and pruning.

“These items that take real people working on them, we’re having to do less of because we can’t do those overtime hours,” Staehely said.

One major uncertainty, however, has been temporarily resolved. Earlier this year,



OREGON DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE/CONTRIBUTED

Oregon’s nurseries generated about \$1.3 billion in sales in 2024, the latest figures available from the Oregon Department of Agriculture. They employ more than 10,400 workers, provide \$487.4 million in annual payroll.

growers feared the expiration of funding for Oregon’s Japanese beetle eradication program could unleash shipping restrictions from other states.

Lawmakers ultimately restored funding after OAN and others advocated it, highlighting how devastating the alternative

would be. The funding enabled the Oregon Department of Agriculture to continue the eradication effort and preserve open shipping lines for Oregon-grown nursery stock. Stone called the outcome a major victory for the industry.

“If we didn’t work this out,” he said, “the

first question you asked me, ‘How was the year?’ would have been vastly different.”

Looking ahead, Stone believes Oregon’s nursery industry can adapt to whatever comes next within limits. “Nurseries are resilient and they can deal with a lot of stuff,” he said, “if they’re able to plan for it.”



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VanHoooses dreamed of buying a nursery

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**

For the Capital Press

David and Kristin VanHoose were working 9-to-5 jobs and living in Vancouver, Wash., when they found the answer to a dream with the purchase of a nursery nestled in the pastoral countryside near Aurora, Ore.

“We wanted to be our own bosses,” Kristin VanHoose said.

It was a steep learning curve, but sellers Art and Terry Bell helped smooth the transition and, in 1999, VanHoose Enterprises was under way.

One of the first things they did was to establish an online presence.

“This was before the internet really took off, and we kind of rode that wave,” VanHoose said. “Do you know how clunky the shopping carts were back then?”

When they purchased the nursery, about 80% of the business was wholesale. Within a few years, it had shifted to an even split

between wholesale and retail.

“When the recession hit in 2009, we ended up stuck with a bunch of nursery stock,” she said. “That’s when we decided to focus on hydrangeas because they were already the majority of our sales.”

Today, retail arm Hydrangeas Plus accounts for about 90% of the business, with roughly 70% of sales coming through online orders and the balance through onsite retail and offsite plant sales.

Amethyst Hill Nursery, the company’s wholesale division, now represents about 10% of the business.

“We became a niche nursery, and today we have nearly 400 varieties of hydrangeas in production,” VanHoose said. “We do about 15,000 cuttings a year and bring in transplants of the patented varieties.”

Over the past several years — including as recently as this season — the nursery has battled heat, wind and labor challenges that



BRENNA WIEGAND/FOR THE CAPITAL PRESS

Kristin VanHoose enjoys bloom season at Hydrangeas Plus in Aurora, Oregon. She and husband David VanHoose purchased the nursery in 1999.

See VanHoooses, Page 7



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R & D Wholesale Nursery is in its 20th year

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

R & D Wholesale Nursery — a family business near Idaho Falls, Idaho — is now in its 20th year.

Brothers David and Barry Vest and their father Richard started their nursery in 2006. Their goal was to supply trees to local landscape contractors as a wholesale business, but their retail following grew and now represents a large portion of their business.

“We started with temporary seasonal employees but as the need arose we hired more full-time help and now have 6 with us year round, and 25 total employees this year,” David says.

It is important to keep up with what people want.

“We try to make sure we are acquiring the right products. Since we are a wholesale yard we do things a little different than most nurseries. Our margins might be just a bit lower but we make up for that in how much product we move.”

“It’s hard to beat the quality and the speed the Oregon growers can do, so a lot of our container trees come from them.”

David Vest
R & D Wholesale Nursery

As trends change, they’ve had to change. “Conifers 6 feet and up are getting harder to find, and what you do find is expensive. We have a good supply of evergreen trees 6 feet and under and thank our growers for that,” he says.

Their shade trees and flowering trees start with 15-gallon container size, which is 1.25 inch caliper and anywhere from 8 to 12 feet



HEATHER SMITH THOMAS/FOR THE CAPITAL PRESS
Brothers David and Barry Vest , and their father Richard, started their nursery in 2006. Their goal was to supply trees to local landscape contractors as a wholesale business, but their retail following grew and now represents a large portion of their business.

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By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

Jayker Wholesale Nursery in Nampa, Idaho, was actually started in Meridian in 1982 by Doug and Meredith Carnahan.

Meredith was a gardener and started the nursery after she and Doug bought property where earlier owners had planted 19 acres of conifers; she took an interest in the trees — and it grew from there. They named the nursery after their children Jason and Kerry (Jayker).

They started as a wholesale grower, selling to garden centers, large landscaping companies and re-wholesalers, then opened a 20-acre re-wholesale yard in 1993 where landscapers can purchase material. This nursery sells plants into several states and different temperature zones, and people can select what grows best in their region. They also offer syringa (Idaho’s state flower — *Philadelphus lewisii*). The standard type grows up to 12 feet tall, but people with small yards often want the smaller variety.

For many years they had two operations. One was the growing facility and the other was the wholesale nursery. Kayla Ruzicka, sales manager, says that 10 years ago they split.

“The grower portion is now a different company we still purchase from, so now we are re-wholesale only. Everything that we sell is sourced elsewhere,” she says.

The current owners purchased the nursery in 2022. The plants are sourced from Washington, Oregon, California and Utah



See Jayker, Page 7 Part of the Jayker Wholesale Nursery crew. The business is located in Nampa, Idaho.

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VanHooses

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have resulted in significant plant losses.

"When we had the 115-degree heat dome a couple years ago, we had just finished planting our 1-gallon pots, and we lost about half because we simply couldn't get enough water to them," she said. "Not only was the wind blowing the plants over; it was blowing the water from our overhead irrigation.

"Many of the toppled plants remained on the ground for days without adequate

water and we had to cut them back or throw them out because of the damage."

Hydrangeas are among the most heavily hybridized and rapidly evolving ornamental shrubs on the market. Over the past two decades, breeders have introduced a steady stream of new varieties offering greater cold hardiness, repeat blooming, stronger stems, cascading forms and more compact growth habits.

VanHoose's favorites change with the seasons. One standout is Hydrangea serrata 'Beni,' whose white flowers gradually transform to shades of blue and pink before finishing the season in a symphony

of reds.

Kristin has served in every board position and on numerous committees for the Oregon Association of Nurseries (OAN), but her favorite role was serving on the scholarship committee, helping identify the industry's next generation of leaders.

The OAN also successfully advocated for nurseries to remain open during the COVID-19 pandemic, provided visitors maintained 6 feet of distance. Those two years became some of the nursery's strongest on record.

"Everyone was home fixing up their yards," VanHoose said. "We just blew

through plants, mail order and retail, despite the sharp drop in wholesale business."

Looking ahead, the VanHooses continue searching for ways to improve efficiency while adapting to increasingly unpredictable weather. They're exploring planting directly into larger containers to reduce handling, outsourcing soil mixing, and switching from round to square pots to better withstand fierce winds.

After seeing how easily gusts can carry overhead irrigation away from thirsty plants, installing drip irrigation will likely become one of their top priorities.

R & D

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tall, depending on the variety. "That's usually small trees, for us, and we go up to 3-inch caliper ball/burlap trees. Many retail nurseries have more of the 5- to 7-gallon containers, some 10 gallon and a few 15s and 25s but mostly smaller trees," Dave says.

R & D Wholesale nursery tries to carry larger ones. Many of their customers are landscape contractors, and the people they contract for want already-grown trees.

"We found that the 15-gallon tree is ideal because at that stage it really wants to get its roots going and grow. By contrast, a smaller tree will take quite a while to establish, in our area, and a bigger tree will also take a little longer. Often you will see a 15-gallon tree planted next to a bigger, 2-inch caliper ball/burlap tree and they will be virtually the same size in five years," he says.

This nursery doesn't experiment with exotic plants. The zone here is a 4 or

maybe 5A so they try to stay with plants they know will grow well in this climate. "Our customers appreciate our selection. We may not have every variety of what's out there. We like to keep it simple and dependable."

"If we can help our landscaping customers be successful, we will be successful. We don't buy from brokers. We prefer to personally see every grower's operation. Some of the growers we've been dealing with since we started —20 years of good relationships," he says.

Some of their growers are local but most are in Oregon. "They have some of the best nurseries in the world. It's hard to beat the quality and the speed the Oregon growers can do, so a lot of our container trees come from them."

Their father retired a few years ago but David and Barry both have kids working at the nursery. "I'd be tickled pink if one of them steps up and wants to make a career of this; I'd like to see this kept in the family, but at the same time I'd be glad to see them forge their own path and do whatever they want to do."

Jayker

Continued from Page 6

as well as Idaho.

"This way we have a diverse range of products. We specialize in cold-hardy trees, shrubs, perennials and ornamental grasses that do well in our area," Kayla says.

"We provide a service to many companies that contact us with lists of various material they need. A lot of it we'll have in stock but if we don't have it, we'll find it for them. They tell us what they need and we do everything we can to get it here and have it ready when they need it."

Most of their customers are landscape companies.

"We are fortunate to have many loyal customers who have been with us since we first opened our doors, and we are equally grateful to continue welcoming new customers each year." Some of their customers are other nurseries, personal gardeners, contractors, builders and some state and city entities.

"Big or small, new or established, our greatest success comes from helping our cus-

tomers grow their business. We take pride in providing quick turnarounds by sourcing from trusted, quality vendors and working closely with our customers to get them the material they need, exactly when they need it," Kayla says.

Sometimes the jobs are one day out, but can be years out.

"We try to coordinate all of that, with plant logistics. Our customers rely on us to hold the material for them or continue to rotate it so we have the highest quality plants for them when they need it. Many customers don't have holding yards to hold their material for very long."

This nursery has a great team, with five people in sales and six who work in the yard.

"We have one buyer, a general manager, and one person in accounting. It's a relatively small team, considering the volume we do," she says.

"We are members of the Idaho Nursery and Landscape Association and concentrate on having the right material here, at the right time. We believe this is one of the reasons customers continue to choose us. We take pride in providing exceptional customer service and offering a wide variety of high-quality plant material."

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