



Glacier Nursery Inc., in Kalispell, MT, grew from 20 acres to 77 acres since the first trees were planted in the fields in 1983.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. That's especially true for Glacier Nursery Inc., a wholesale growing operation in Kalispell, MT.

When *AMERICAN NURSEYMAN* first covered the 5-year-old fledgling nursery in its Dec. 1, 1988, issue, Brad Brown, who co-owns the business with his wife, Desi, had 20 acres of B&B trees and bare-root shrubbery and dreamed of sales one day reaching \$275,000 annually. Now, Glacier Nursery comprises 77 acres and has sales of its B&B and containerized trees, shrubs and perennials in excess of \$3 million.

Back then, the Browns lived in a trailer home planted on the nursery's land. Desi worked full-time to support the family, spending any spare time in the fields helping Brad produce plants acclimated to Montana's harsh weather. Then, the couple rented or borrowed much of the equipment they used and figured one day they'd be able to afford a computer to help streamline their business.

Now, the couple has their own off-site home, as well as approximately 20 year-round employees to help them run the business. They own much of the equipment the nursery uses and, of course, there are numerous computers to help them, along with a fancy Web site, www.glaciernursery.com. They also have three children who grew up with the nursery and helped it to flourish.

Regardless of how small their business once was and how big it is now, the Browns are happy enough to have begun their nursery as they did. "It's all kind of comical," recalls Brown. "Desi and I laugh a lot because we realize that had we had more money starting out, we would have wasted more money. There's virtue in starting relatively small with modest means and modest expectations."

Now *and* Then

by SARAH LANDICHO

Nearly 20 years later, AMERICAN NURSERYMAN takes a look at Montana's Glacier Nursery Inc. to see how it has blossomed and grown.



No matter how much has changed since the couple hand-planted their first trees in 1983, the principles by which they run their business have been constant. "I've always looked at it from the standpoint that ... we all have a role, and mine has been to provide employment for a lot of good, interested people who

are very dedicated," Brown says. "Our mission has always been to go ahead and offer up employment opportunities, to grow plants, to provide quality nursery stock at a great price and good service and to return to the community what it has provided me so generously through the years to make our business dream

come true. My goal has never been to be the biggest, but rather to be one of the best and to be profitable at it."

Turning a profit. In the early days of the nursery, the profit part of the dream was the most elusive. While the Browns knew in their bones they had what it took to succeed, they also knew it wouldn't take much in the way of bad luck or bad weather to strip them of their hopes.

"Having only been in business about five years, we still probably hadn't really turned a profit," Brown recalls. "We were still very much on the edge, and had things fallen against us, had we lost a lot of crop, if sales hadn't increased — if any number of things had happened to us — we wouldn't have made it 10 years."

Listening to their customers and evaluating the industry has been an important ingredient to the nursery's success. In the early 1980s, the nursery industry was undergoing a sea change. "[Growers] were moving from bare root toward potting plants up for the garden centers. ... When I first came to Montana, most garden centers were buying bare root and potting it up and selling that, and that had been the traditional way of doing it," Brown says. "I was trying to jump in on the front end and sell B&B trees and bare-root shrubbery,



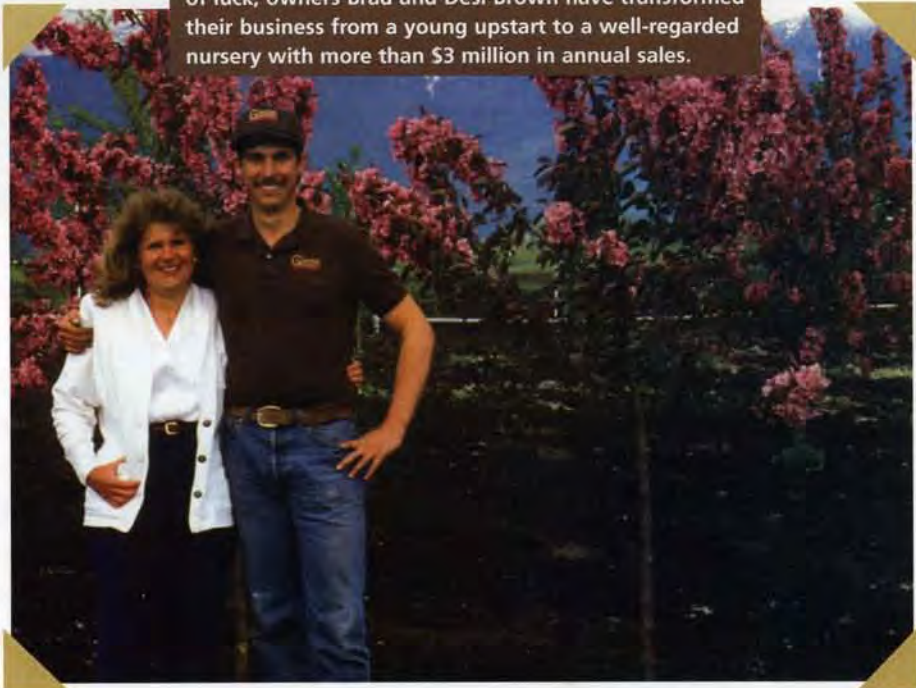
With the help of great employees and a good amount of luck, owners Brad and Desi Brown have transformed their business from a young upstart to a well-regarded nursery with more than \$3 million in annual sales.

'I'll bend over backward for my customer, and I expect my employees to do the same.'

but the industry was evolving, and there was more and more of a movement to the containerized plant. Now, that is the mainstay of our business."

Back then, customers also were beginning to request plant material beyond the customary sales window. "It became obvious the direction we needed to go was toward year-round sales, from March to November. That's when we were able to provide more employment, and getting the full-time staff enabled us to get to where we are today," he explains.

The here and now. Exactly where is Glacier Nursery today? It is planted firmly in acclimated, containerized plant material. The nursery grows more than 650



species. While about 25 percent of sales remain B&B trees, the remainder is containerized: 25 percent shrubs, 25 percent trees, 20 percent evergreens and 5 percent perennials.

Over the years, the customer base has changed from mostly garden centers to mostly landscapers. Landscaping businesses comprise about 60 percent of the

nursery's clients. But no matter who the buyers are, they all are looking for acclimated plant material, Brown says.

"I think the thing we are known for is selling plant material that is acclimated to our climate. ... While The Home Depot sells plants that can maybe survive a winter or two, we sell plants that make it here year after year. In turn, the plants are in



Montana weather can be harsh, and Glacier Nursery Inc. prides itself on quality material acclimated to the environment.

Recycling is very important at the nursery. After trimming, the cuttings are composted.



sequence with our weather. ... They're not in full leaf and don't require extra protection, and that's a really big point," he adds.

With more and more affluent people moving to Montana and building larger homes, they are asking for — and are willing to pay for — larger plant material, which has changed some aspects of Glacier Nursery's business. "Some requests we get from people are so outrageous, and I don't mean that in a negative way," Brown explains. "We're just so accustomed to 'bigger is better.'"

Bigger now means up to 3-inch-caliper trees and 7-gallon shrubs, although the bulk of what they plant is 2- to 2½-inch caliper, as well as smaller shrubs, he adds.

With the popularity of containers, producing large-caliper trees can be risky. "The challenge is growing the same tree in a container that you grow in the field," Brown says. "There are a number of perils to trees that size in containers: wind, insects — everything is amplified when a tree is in a container. It's not anchored in the ground. It just creates that many more opportunities to create culls."

Despite the difficulties, Glacier Nursery's team of growers has developed a system of techniques to produce tough, beautiful, containerized material. "We've worked very, very hard to perfect growing trees in containers," Brown explains. "I've always enjoyed growing trees, and I've put a lot of effort into perfecting the procedures for this locale."

Native plant material is another request customers have been making. While Brown wouldn't call Glacier Nursery a native plant grower, the business certainly has expanded its offerings. "[Na-



One of the nursery's many challenges is ensuring the containerized trees are as healthy and strong as its field-grown specimens.

tives] are pretty ubiquitous now," he says. "We're doing more and more of these items, but we are certainly not an exclusive grower of them."

No matter what Glacier Nursery produces, the tough environment has remained constant. "One of the biggest challenges we had back 20 years ago, and that we will have 20 years from now, is how to deal with a climate that has a 100-day growing season. We have one frost-free month, and that is July," Brown explains.

The answer so far has been to cover the plants through the winter months. But the fact that Glacier Nursery's plants are produced in the same type of environment they will one day be planted into is what makes them durable. This simple idea is reflected in the nursery's motto: "Montana grown, you know it's hardy."

Taking pride in the work. In addition to the company's plant material, the Browns are proud of a number of other aspects of their nursery, including providing excellent customer service. That means regularly accommodating last-minute requests in a cheerful manner.

"I expect us to be able to meet our customers' requests, even within the day. That starts at the top. If I'm indifferent and uncaring or ridicule the customer for a request, clearly my employees will do the same thing," Brown says. "I'll bend over backward for my customer, and I expect my employees to do the same."

"It just makes sense," he continues. "People spend so much money to find customers, and once they've found

them, you have to appreciate them and what they are doing. It's a relationship, and we bend over backward to accommodate them."

Because the Browns ask so much of their employees, the owners do their best to give back to them. And the employees have noticed. The nursery boasts several employees who started with the company years ago as high school workers looking to make extra money, and they've matured with the nursery.

Weathering the industry's changes over the years by remaining dedicated to honorable operating principles has helped Glacier Nursery flourish the past 20 years.

"Clearly, there's a group that's been with me for a long time," Brown says. "I would hope we're providing them with reasonable wages and benefits that will help them. I try very hard to make sure we don't offer benefits that we have to go back on."

For Glacier Nursery, that means paying 75 percent of health insurance after six months of employment, offering a solid 401(k) plan and paying everyone hourly. "The bottom line is, the more you work, the more you earn," Brown explains. "In spring especially, in salaried positions, the more you work, the less you actually earn per hour. If you work 50 or 60 hours per week, you deserve time and half for hours worked over 40. It is costly, but I wouldn't consider doing anything differently."

In order to retain employees, the Browns promote from within. "This is good if you're on the payroll, but hard if you're trying to work your way in because you have to pay your dues," Brown says. But for the employers, it all comes down to whether you like the work or not.

"People really like [the work] or dislike it. There's not a huge, big, gray area in between," he explains. "If you're fortunate enough to have people who really seem to like it, and you have the potential for long-term employees, you should try to pay them to keep them because you can't change the work."

While he does experience some turnover, even the seasonal work force has been reliable. Montana attracts the outdoorsy "crunchy granola" types, he explains, and oftentimes they're searching for temporary work between ski season and firefighting season. "I still to this day



Although not an exclusive producer of native plants, Glacier Nursery Inc. continues to grow increasing numbers of this type of material, including pussy willow.

don't have immigrant labor," Brown says, and he knows many other nurseries struggle with the associated issues.

The Browns also encourage employees to take ownership in the company, and they rely on their workers to help them build the business. "I try to utilize my employees' ideas. At the end of sea-

son, we talk about what we did wrong and right," Brown explains. Whether it's the employees in shipping or those working in the office or the field, they've been able to work together to develop some of the best cost-saving ideas to improve efficiency and profitability.

In addition to committing to their cus-

tomers and employees, the Browns also are compelled to improve the environment. "We're trying to be good stewards of the land," Brown says. "We're part of that '70s generation."

That means recycling the water on-site and selling used oil. They compost as much refuse as they can, including plant trimmings and culled specimens. Glacier Nursery also recycles the plastic plant pots. "We're diligent about recycling those. We purchase them back from our customers," Brown says. "Potting with used pots versus new pots is a pain in the butt, but you can't throw it all out. You've got to use it."

Weathering the industry's changes over the years by remaining dedicated to honorable operating principles has helped Glacier Nursery flourish the past 20 years. With a strong foundation based on hard work, family and a reliable, much-appreciated work force, the Browns fully expect to overcome any obstacles that arrive in the next 20 years and to provide their customers with quality, acclimated nursery products that are Montana-grown and Montana-tough.

Sarah Landicho is a contributing writer of AMERICAN NURSERYMAN. ♡

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While the nursery began with field production, the owners switched to mostly containerized material in response to the shifting industry.