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Experience, networking pay off for new company



Growing up in Pennsylvania, Carol Coley knew that someday she wanted to either raise horses or grow plants in her own greenhouse. At the age of 19 she moved to Oregon and began working for Nike in the marketing department. But her dream of growing plants motivated her to go back to school to receive an associate's degree in horticulture from Clackamas Community College.

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After working 25 years for other horticulture companies in Oregon, including Klupenger s Nursery & Greenhouses, Al s GardenCenter and Fessler Nursery, Coley felt she had acquired the business and technical knowledge she needed to start her own company. In addition, Coley took small-business classes at a community college.

I took a series of classes that included how to prepare a business plan and business counseling, she said. All of the people I talked to told me to prepare a business plan first. It s something that I look at every year and revise it.

Starting out

Coley started her business, Carol s Greenhouses & Gardens, in 2004 with one 30-by-90-foot greenhouse in Molalla, Ore. At the time she was still working full time as the main grower and propagator at Fessler Nursery. She sold her plants at the Beaverton Farmer s Market.

I started growing part time just to see how things would go, Coley said. I was growing bedding plants, mixed baskets, unusual perennials and tropicals including alocaisia, colocasia and euphorbias. I was looking to find a niche.

In 2006, Coley was approached about purchasing a 2.6-acre property in Salem, Ore., that was in foreclosure. Before making the decision to move, Coley determined how much money she needed to operate the first year in business. She made her projections based on information she received from Juillards, a small nursery in Canby, Ore.

They (Judy and Larry Juillard) encouraged me that I could do this based on their size, she said. They operated four greenhouses and sold wholesale and also retailed at the Beaverton Farmer s Market. Most of my planning was based on their books and projections. I had to figure out how much money I was going to need to run the business for a whole year and set that money aside. I looked at the business from a worst-case scenario.

Coley used money from the sale of her home in Molalla to finance the property in Salem and to purchase the materials she needed to start the business. One change she would have made in the relocation process was the time of year she moved. She moved in May, taking her existing greenhouses with her.

The greenhouses were the last thing that were moved, she said. I probably didn t sell as much as I could have because I was in the transition process. It would have been better to have the structures actually put up before trying to move product.

Coley has two FarmTek greenhouses covering 10,000 square feet that are equipped with Horticultural Services benching systems and Dosatron injectors. BioTherm bench heating has been installed in the propagation house. One production adjustment she had to make is to inject citric acid into the irrigation system to lower the pH of the well water.





Coley said she would eventually like to add three more structures to increase the covered production area another 10,000 square feet.

I m at a point where I want to establish the business and organize what I have before I add any more greenhouses, she said. I m trying to maximize the space I already have. I m also looking at what can be grown outside.

Changing customer base

Making the move to Salem required Coley to expand sales to include wholesale customers. Most of her customers are independent garden centers located between the cities of HoodRiver, Medford, Eugene and Richfield. She still sells retail at the Beaverton Farmer s Market, the Spring Plant Sale & Garden Festival sponsored by the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon, the Clark Public Utilities Home & Garden Idea Fair and the Clackamas County Master Gardeners Annual Spring Garden Fair.

I like selling at the farmer s market and participating in the plant sales, she said. I enjoy talking to the end consumers, which allows me to find out what their interests are. As growers, we can produce what we like, but that doesn t mean it s going to sell.

Coley holds an invitation-only annual open house for retail and wholesale customers around March 31 called the Season Premiere. Customers view products Coley will offer for the upcoming season.

Initially, I would go out and drop in on retailers, introduce myself and provide them with some samples, she said. People liked what they saw and started to place orders.

Now that her business is becoming established, sales are generated by word-of-mouth, people stopping by her operation and from preorders.

Coley said networking has helped her get the word out about her company. She is an active member of the Oregon Association of Nurseries and was president of OAN s greenhouse chapter.

Propagating sales

Coley s product mix is 70 percent perennials, 20 percent annuals and 10 percent tropicals. One of her goals is to reduce numbers or remove a plant when it starts to become more common.

I go through catalogs from Darwin Plants, WaltersGardens and look on the Internet for different plants, she said. I have also traveled to nurseries in Mexico, Peru and Thailand looking for plants to bring back. I m most interested in plants that can grow in this part of the country. Since many of these plants are tropical in nature, I sell them as tropical annuals.

Since most of Coley s finished plant sales occur during April and May, she is looking to expand sales by starting a liner division with about 50 varieties of perennials and tropicals. The liners are produced in 105-cell trays and 2 1/2-inch pots. Coley said the 2 1/2-inch pots allow growers to transplant the plants into gallon containers for quick turnover. She said liner sales start in August and extend through February.



My next project is to build a Web site, Coley said. Many people aren't familiar with the plants I'm propagating. They are looking for photos, descriptions and cultural information.

Urban Illusions offers multiseason sales

When Carol Coley, owner of Carol's Greenhouses & Gardens in Salem, Ore., is looking for new plants, she always has the end consumer in mind.

I want non-fussy plants, she said. Plants that are easy to maintain and grow well in this area. I'm also looking for plants that flower and/or have foliage with color or unique textures or fragrance. Plants that have a multipurpose. Not something that blooms once and it's done.

Coley is working with Copper Creek Mercantile in Keizer, Ore., to produce a series of mixed containers for the four seasons of the year. Copper Creek, which retails garden center hard goods and pet supplies, provides Coley with the containers she uses to create a line of combination planters called Urban Illusions.

Copper Creek provides 16- and 20-inch, lightweight resin containers for each season. She creates four designs for each container size. Coley plants up the containers and grows them on, then Copper Creek sells and delivers them. The finished containers are sold to businesses, hotels, convention centers, condominium complexes and consumers.

I created the Urban Illusions name to appeal to consumers in the 25- to 35-year-old-age group, Coley said. I grow most of the plants that go into the containers. There may be a few plants that I have to purchase if I need a minimum number or they're not feasible for me to grow.

Although Coley markets the Urban Illusions brand only through Copper Creek, she does have the option of expanding the line to other garden centers.

I have worked initially with Copper Creek because we had the ideas and the product to make the program work, she said. Customers would see the containers at Copper Creek and asked if they could buy ones with the plants already in them.

For more: Copper Creek Mercantile, (503) 393-5450.

Carol's Greenhouses & Gardens

Founded:
In 2004 by Carol Coley.

Location:
Salem

Ore.

Crops:
Annuals, perennials and tropicals and hanging baskets. Propagates vegetative liners.



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Market:

Retail and wholesale. Finished crops are sold to independent garden centers and directly to consumers at farmer s markets and area plant sales.

Production space:

10,000 square feet of greenhouse space and 10, 000 square feet of outdoor production.

Employees:

Five part time from January through May. Additional employees are needed in peak production and shipping periods.

For more:

Carol s Greenhouses & Gardens, (503) 399-7187; cgg5135@msn.com; www.carolsgreenhouse.com.

- David Kuack

June 2008

