

J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.

Oregon giant still pursues its founder's vision of innovating for the long haul



Left-right: Sam Barkley Jr., Jan Barkley, Art Anderson, J. Frank Schmidt III and Gordy Webster
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J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.

Founded: 1946

Principals: J. Frank Schmidt III (president), Jan Barkley (executive vice president), Jean Webster (vice president) and Art Anderson (general manager, chief operating officer)

Known for: Introducing and growing deciduous shade, flowering and specialty ornamental trees and shrubs

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J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. is one of Oregon's largest growers, with more than 2,300 acres in production on six farms.

But the family-owned nursery casts a shadow of influence even greater than its acreage would indicate. A longtime company slogan, "We're Growing New Ideas!" reflects the nursery's long track record of developing and introducing new tree selections that can outperform what's already on the market.

The company's late founder, J. Frank Schmidt Jr., pursued a never-ending quest for trees that grew best in the nursery and performed best in the landscape. He believed in never resting on his laurels — or in his case, his maples, oaks, elms and crabapples.

"Part of our history is developing new trees," said his son, J. Frank Schmidt III, who now leads the company. "It started in the 1960s with Red Sunset® maple, and it continued from there."

Following its introduction, Red Sunset® maple (*Acer rubrum* 'Franksred') quickly became the single most planted

ornamental tree variety in North America, and also sold well in the rest of the world. "Since that time, J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. has introduced more than 70 different selections," Frank III said.

"With more in the pipeline," added his sister, Jan Barkley, who co-owns the nursery with Frank and their sister, Jean Webster.

These days, bare root shade and flowering trees make up two-thirds of the company's dollar volume. The remaining one-third or so consists of containerized trees.

Most of the bare root material is sold to other growers, and consists of first and second year trees. These growers then grow the material up to full market size. The container material is grown for longer and is sold to a variety of markets. The company also sells a small quantity of material B&B and in rootbags.

The trees are sold all over the United States and internationally, with the strongest concentration of customers in the Great Lakes region, New England, and the Mid-Atlantic states.



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“Wholesale growers are the largest single component of our customer base,” General Manager Art Anderson said. “We also sell to retailers, landscape distribution centers, landscapers, developers and municipalities. But growers of caliper trees are our single largest customer segment.”

A 10-acre beginning

J. Frank Schmidt was a nurseryman in the 1920s who switched to growing vegetables during World War II. Postwar, he returned to the nursery business and grew grafted conifers and Japanese maples.

His son, J. Frank Schmidt Jr., married Evelyn (Mantsch) in 1946 and at the age of 26 founded his own nursery — J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. — on 10 acres near Troutdale, the gateway to the Columbia River Gorge. The community was then largely rural, and the trees benefited from rich alluvial soils on the site.

“As the United States grew in the postwar years, there was tremendous opportunity,” Art said. “[Frank Jr.] captured the market for shade and flowering trees. He had a remarkable eye for the best varieties. And that tradition has been carried on ever since.”

The market rewarded Frank Jr.’s commitment to quality tree selections. The nursery, needing more acreage, purchased sites in nearby Boring, as well as property near the rural Willamette Valley community of Canby. In 1967, the company purchased Milton Nursery, located in Milton-Freewater in Eastern Oregon, near the city of Pendleton.

“We kept adding pieces of land as we grew,” Frank III said.

Each of the company’s farms has its own specific climate suited to growing particular types of trees. The more heat-tolerant selections grow best at the Milton Farm. Trees such as oaks and maples that prefer a cooler climate are grown at the Boring site (now known as Hood Acres). There, they benefit from the altitude and the influence of the Columbia Gorge winds. The Willamette Valley farm near Canby has milder conditions favored by flowering cherries, crabapples and other species. ▶

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A lasting impact

Frank Jr. passed away in 2004. Although his children took over day-to-day management of the company in the late 1980s, he remained chairman of the board up until his death. His impact is still felt throughout the company.

Frank III still remembers the lessons his father taught — to take care of the customers, hire and retain good people, and never take shortcuts on quality. Many of the key people have been with the company for 25 years or more.

In his time as president, Frank III has expanded the company's investment in the development of new selections. He appointed Keith Warren as the company's first full-time director of new products. Warren keeps a trial orchard at Hood Acres, where trees are tested and compared over the long haul, but the company's development

program doesn't end there.

Efforts at the Schmidt farms are matched with cooperation with universities, other growers, and numerous trial sites where trees are performance tested in tremendously varied climate extremes: The Morton Arboretum near Chicago, Cornell University in New York, Auburn University in Alabama, and North Dakota State University, to name a few.

It's a long-term game. One of the company's most significant introductions over the past several years is the Redpointe® maple, introduced in 2006.

"It was grown from a cross made 17 years prior to introduction," Art said. "It takes a long time to grow, identify and evaluate new varieties, to make sure they are significant improvements over the existing ones."

The company also funds horticultural research through the J. Frank Schmidt

Family Charitable Foundation. This provides third-party testing, enhancing the credibility of each surviving selection.

"By supporting horticultural research, it isn't just us tooting our horn about the value and performance of our introductions, and about trees in general," company communications director Nancy Buley said. "It's the academic and scientific community that helps us determine whether a tree will be successful or not."

Outreach is another crucial element in Schmidt's success. The company keeps an open communication line with professionals who specify trees for inclusion in landscapes. These include landscape architects and designers, city foresters, arborists as well as members of the horticultural press.

Another form of outreach is the company's ongoing "Trees are the answer" marketing campaign, which educates potential customers on shade tree benefits. A wealth of information is available at www.treesaretheanswer.info.

A growing legacy

J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. is known for many things — its size, innovations, and the long list of successful tree introductions. This continues in spite of the recent economy.

"The new definition of success is survival," Art said. "J. Frank Schmidt, like all nurseries, has had to change and adjust to the challenges of the past seven years. We are a smaller, leaner, more efficient company today than we were previously. While our crystal ball is as cloudy as anybody else's, we do see opportunities in the future."

According to Nancy, family ownership explains why the company has held together for 67 years, and why it still keeps its eye on the future.

"Families are in the nursery industry for the long haul," she said. "The timeline of growing trees is such that you can't be answering to quarterly reports. There are plenty of quarters that stockholders wouldn't like the looks of. But a family can have faith in the long term, and the Schmidts do." ©



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