

MEET THE LEADER

CURT KIPP



Josh Zielinski

OAN'S NEWEST YOUNG NURSERY PROFESSIONAL OF THE YEAR ENJOYS THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES THAT COME WITH GREEN INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT



Leader Profile:
Josh Zielinski
Assistant Manager, Alpha Nursery, Salem, Ore..

Background: I grew up on the family farm and nursery here in Salem. I've always been involved with the business. Instead of going to preschool, I tagged along with my dad as much as I could. Not long after, I began doing small tasks around the nursery for 75 cents an hour. After high school I went to college in Southern California, where I studied business and Spanish in an attempt to explore the world outside agriculture and nursery. After exploring, I decided home was the best place to be. I use the business and Spanish skills I acquired at college every day working in the nursery business.

Guiding principle: It may be a cliché, but there's a reason they've deemed it the Golden Rule: "Treat others as you would like to be treated." On both a personal and professional level, I feel that striving to live by this principle ensures a happy and meaningful life.

Goals yet to be achieved: I've been at Alpha for a while now, but I feel like I am just getting started. I like the size of the nursery and I have no real aspirations to physically expand it. However, I'd like to find different ways to produce more plants (and profit) on the same space with the same number of people. I strive to perfect the product mix to create the best place an independent retailer and landscaper can shop. I'd like to discover a plant or two and give them really funny or meaningful names. Personally, I would

like to have a family as great as mine someday and climb mountains, big and small, all over the world and right here in the Pacific Northwest.

Best business decision: Coming back to the home farm and nursery when I did. It's so nice to know that I've got years to go working with the people who were there in the beginning, and who have built this business from scratch. I've got a lot to learn from the co-workers who have been here for 15, 20, even 25 years. I've especially got a lot to learn from the general manager R.J. Tancredi, who has been making things happen here for 30 years.

Hardest business decision: Deciding to take on the purchase of a 400-acre farm with my brother, Scott. I lost nights of sleep just thinking about that one. That was three years ago and so far, so good. I've always taken a good deal of ownership in my work, no matter where it was, but this decision has taken that to another level.

Most significant mentor: My mom and dad, Jamie and Doug, have been mentors my entire life. My mom's the most caring, kind-hearted person I know. A great listener, she's also an example of patience and focus. My dad has been a great example of hard work. I admire the long hours he puts into the company to make things not only go, but thrive. Both of them together have shown me what a great team — a team where the individuals' strengths

complement each other's weaknesses, and where both individuals have an equal level of commitment — can accomplish.

Best business advice? I recently read an African proverb in the book "The World is Flat" that relates well to business: "Every morning in Africa a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the lion or it will not survive. Every morning a lion wakes up and it knows it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve. It doesn't matter if you are the lion or the gazelle, when the sun comes up, you better be running." I've also received all sorts of advice stressing the importance of quality and service above all else. This is invaluable advice.

What do you love most about the nursery industry? Plants! A product that is created using the most basic ingredients — a cutting, dirt (well, "soiless medium" for fancy talkers) and sunshine — that people love and that adds beauty to the world. I also love the people in the industry. They have so many different backgrounds and personalities, but they all seem to be helpful and passionate.

What is your greatest challenge? As the inventory and production manager, my biggest challenge is dealing with an

inventory that is in a constant state of change. It's not always easy to know or guess what customers will need to be successful. It's not like making oil filters that can sit in a warehouse for decades and eventually be sold. Containerized nursery stock keeps you on your toes. With plants, we can't just flip a switch and crank them out. We've got to get out the "crystal ball" and make them years in advance, which can be quite the challenge.

What motivates you to go to work every day? Opportunities and challenges. I like the feeling of accomplishment that hard work leaves me with at the end of the day. There is only one way to get that feeling; that's getting up and doing it.

What are you most proud of? Family and friends. I am also proud of my accomplishments in sports, academics, and the industry. I try to be humble about things, but I am proud of much of what I have done with my life so far.

Involvement with OAN: The OAN has so much to offer and I enjoy the camaraderie that comes with being involved. I participate in the Government Relations Committee, I co-chair the Sustainability Committee and I am president of the Willamette Chapter. Each committee/group represents something

that is important to me and our industry. I've learned a good deal through my involvement.

In your opinion, what are the most critical challenges facing the nursery industry today? Agriculture is full of challenges, and the nursery industry is no exception. You've got all the usual economic, regulatory and employment issues that all businesses face, coupled with weather and an inventory that is alive and constantly in a state of change. But I'd say the most critical challenges today stem from a crippled economy. As things shake out, we are looking at a rapidly changing market. It has more inventory, fewer customers, and consumers with changing habits. The number of homeowners seems to decrease daily, and renters don't necessarily buy plants. We've got to change our product mix to cater to all of these factors. We must take a fresh look at how we do things to make sure we are competitive without sacrificing quality or too much of the bottom line. This economic challenge has proved to be a valuable learning experience that will make us better in the long run. It has forced us to pay more attention to the things that matter most, such as quality and cost control. ©

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