



CURT KIPP

## Confessions of a plant addict

**Don Howse has accumulated more than 2,000 rare conifer selections during four decades in the horticulture trade**

### Porterhowse Farms

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### *By Curt Kipp*

Don Howse, the owner of Porterhowse Farms in Sandy, Ore., will go to great lengths if it means he can add to his collection of rare and unique conifers. His 7-acre arboretum and garden contains more than 2,000 cultivars, in all different sizes, shapes, and colors.

“Conifers are plants that are ‘bones’ for the garden, and are a source of color, form and texture, especially when other plants are dormant,” he said. “They can provide a

source of interest all of the year.”

Most of the conifers Howse has accumulated are available to collectors who visit Porterhowse Farms by appointment. They can also log onto [www.porterhowse.com](http://www.porterhowse.com) and go to “available conifers” to have the plants shipped anywhere in the United States. “There’s so many unique individual plants available in small numbers,” he said.

Howse has every right to be proud of his very extensive collection. After all, the self-described “plant addict” been all over the world to find his treasures – including the country of Pakistan on Sept. 12, 2001.

After the British Airways jet carrying Howse touched down in



The name Porterhowse Farms comes from a combination of the names of the two men who founded it — Don Howse and Lloyd Porter. Porter passed away in 2007, but Howse continues to offer thousands of rare conifers to customers all over the country via the Web. Some come to Oregon to visit the 7-acre Porterhowse arboretum, located northeast of Sandy.

Islamabad, Pakistan on that date, he learned it would be the last flight into — or out of — that country for some time. Back in the United States, it was still Sept. 11. The country had been attacked by terrorists. All flights had been grounded.

Howse and his companions could do nothing but continue their planned tour of Pakistan's mountainous northern region. Cut off from most communication with the rest of the world, they visited remote alpine villages, made new friends, and gathered seed from rare Asian alpine plants.

"I avoided all of the emotional turmoil everyone in the United States was experiencing. We were oblivious to it," Howse said. "(At one point), we were less than 100 miles away from Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden supposedly had fled."

The group cut its tour short 12 days later after authorities kicked all Westerners out of Pakistan. Rather than going home, Howse and his companions traveled to the mountains of Andalusia, in southern Spain, where they collected still more seeds from conifers and other plants.

Many of the other plants in Howse's vast collection have come from seed exchanges, other collectors, and a 1997 visit and trek in the mountains of Yunnan, China.

"Every time I found a conifer I didn't have, I would add it to the col-

lection if I could," Howse said. "And I'm still doing that."

### Visiting the arboretum

Visitors are always welcome to come see the results of his many travels (and travails). Simply call or e-mail to make your appointment, then drive the winding roads north of Sandy to find his place near the former shores of Roslyn Lake.

Park along the road, then walk the long, gravel driveway, and soon you'll know you're standing in the middle of the most unique retail nursery in Oregon. Rows upon rows of rare conifers and other plants are everywhere.

Howse gladly gives tours of the entire site, including walks along a trail he has built overlooking a bluff, with a commanding view of the Sandy River valley.

There's even a picnic shelter which groups can use at no charge (they must reserve it in advance). Conifer-smitten customers can browse tables filled with rare treasures and make their purchases on the spot.

Wholesale customers are asked to go through R&R Nursery to make their purchases. Howse turned propagation, production, and wholesale marketing over to the firm, owned by Randy and Rita Oster, in 2004.

### Building the Howse of Don

Howse grew up in Southern California, the son of a phone compa-

ny worker. "One day my father asked me what I was going to do for a living, and I said, 'work with plants,'" Howse said. "He said, 'No, I meant a job, not a hobby.' I had to prove to him that working with plants was a real job."

He attended college at the University of Idaho, where he studied ornamental horticulture. In the summers, he worked for Monrovia Growers in Azusa, Calif., which only confirmed his desire to work with plants. "That's where I got my passion for growing and producing, and learned container culture." Howse said.

After college, in 1966 he took a job teaching vocational horticulture and grounds management at the Idaho Youth Training Center, a juvenile reform school in St. Anthony, Idaho, near the base of the Grand Tetons.

"We had greenhouses where we could keep the kids busy during the winter months, and 40 acres of grounds that needed to be maintained," he said.

But Howse didn't want to settle for anything less than being a nursery grower, so he moved to Oregon in 1972. He went to work for Northwest Nurseries, Inc. in Boring, becoming the container production manager for owner Duane Sherwood.

In 1975, Jean and Andre Iseli purchased the nursery, which was adjacent to property their father owned. Jean envisioned creating a nursery that would grow dwarf and miniature spruces. Howse became his personal assistant, helping him build a business that put dwarf conifers into production and took them mainstream.

"Jean was my mentor," Howse said. "I had a great deal of love and respect for the man. Jean and I put together a team of people who are mostly still there today, operating Iseli Nursery. Through working for Jean, I was introduced to many of the great horticultural persons from around the world, when they would come to see him."

In time, Howse became interested in starting his own production nursery. Iseli

helped him get started by letting him use a corner of the Iseli Nursery property.

"Jean encouraged me to grow things and become a grower, even though I was working for him," Howse said. "He didn't feel it was a conflict."

In 1979, Howse founded Porterhowse Farms with his business and life partner, Lloyd Porter. Howse was in charge of production, while Porter took charge of business operations, marketing, and putting together the catalog. Howse often traveled throughout the U.S. searching for new conifers to add to the collection, often sharing his new finds with his mentor, Jean Iseli.

Together, Porter and Howse grew magnolias on the Iseli property for two years, until purchasing the Porterhowse Farms site near Roslyn Lake in 1981. They planted rows of magnolias there too, but soon transitioned to the rare conifers that Howse loved so much.

Porterhowse Farms initially sold to the wholesale trade, but the decision was made to concentrate on retail. Howse felt they could grow retail quantities without the burdens of taking on large bank loans or becoming a large employer. Their only loan was to buy their farm, and they paid that off in seven years.

"Lloyd and I were able to do it out of our own pockets," Howse said.

Howse and Porter both had other jobs, with Don still working at Iseli Nursery for several years. Lloyd worked in international trade for the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Through the years, Howse has taken on many leadership roles in the nursery industry. He has been a member of the Oregon Association of Nurseries since the late 1970s, and chaired the Farwest Show Committee in 1980 and 1981. He also served on the board of Mt. Hood Chapter OAN, and as president of the chapter.

Howse was a charter member of the American Conifer Society (ACS), later serving as president of the Western Region and vice president

#### Don's adventure in Pakistan

Don Howse landed in Pakistan on a plant exploration trip on Sept. 12, 2001, only to discover that the 9/11 terrorist attacks had just happened. Read the fascinating story in Don's own words. "Pakistan — People, Plants, Peaks and Politics: Impressions of a Visitor" can be downloaded from the "library" page at [www.porterhowse.com](http://www.porterhowse.com).

of the national organization board. He has served as president of the Columbia-Willamette Chapter of the North American Rock Garden Society, and on the boards of the Berry Botanic Garden, and the Friends of the Hoyt Arboretum, in Portland.

Howse has also co-chaired the American Conifer Society's national meetings on three occasions, and was chairman of the meeting in Oregon in 1999. Howse is presently serving as president of the Bonsai Society of Portland.

When the ACS national meeting returns to Oregon in August 2011, Porterhowse Farms will be featured as a host site, along with Iseli Nursery, and the Oregon Garden in Silverton.

Although Porter passed away during the summer of 2007, from pancreatic cancer, Howse has continued to operate Porterhowse Farms, with the assistance of Randy and Rita Oster of R&R Nursery & Landscape.

"I've had a wonderful life doing what my father termed as a hobby, and I made it my vocation," Howse said. "My one thing I would say to young people would be: 'Follow your passion. Follow your dreams. I don't regret any of the days I've spent in the horticultural industry.'" ☺

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