

# A legacy of growth

Carlton Plants owner Jon Barch visits with Allan Elliott, operations manager, near one of the company's "floating wetland" projects that clean retention pond water.

Jon Barch, owner of Carlton Plants, follows in his grandfather's footsteps of growing plants as well as people

## Carlton Plants

**Founded:** 1890, Carlton, Ore. Moved to Dayton, Ore. in 1971.

**Employees:** 200 full time.

**Acreage:** 1,950 acres on several farms.

**Products:** Bare root shade trees, ornamental trees, fruit trees, shrubs, vines, rootstocks and seedlings.

## Jon Barch

**Career:** Appointed general manager in 1991. Purchased company in 1997.

**Family:** Wife Jennifer; two sons, 12 and 15.

*By Curt Kipp*

When people talk about Oregon nurseries with a strong environmental commitment, the discussion often begins with Carlton Plants.

Few in the industry were surprised when the high-quality bare root tree, shrub and rootstock grower won the inaugural Outstanding Environmental Stewardship of the Year Award at the 2010 OAN Convention.

Carlton's history of caring for the land in innovative ways goes back decades. It's part of an overall commitment to quality, which has given Carlton Plants a top reputation among Oregon growers.

"We never stop changing," owner Jon Barch said. "Once you become complacent in any aspect of your business, you start going backwards."

## A practical approach

When it comes to conservation, Carlton has emphasized a practical approach that is much in line with the prevailing definition of sustainability (people, planet and profits). The grower keeps all three in mind as it implements new sustainable practices.

"When you do them right, they add to the bottom line of the company," operations manager Allan Elliott said.

However, Carlton also encourages risk and innovation. "Jon has provided a lot of leeway," Elliott said. "He's allowed us to try things that look crazy on the surface, and not all have worked, but we've had some successes.



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It's made things fun, too."

One of Carlton's latest projects is a series of artificial floating wetlands, which are being used to clean retention ponds. The raft-like structures are planted with sedges, dogwoods, irises and other plants. The roots reach into the water, absorbing nutrients from field runoff that otherwise would encourage an overgrowth of algae.

Elliott learned about the technology during a trip to Europe, then refined it with help from Oregon State University, the Sustainable Plant Research and Outreach Center (SPROut), and the Yamhill Soil & Water Conservation District. The floating wetlands have yielded encouraging results, and Carlton is hoping to build more of them each year going forward.

Other environmental initiatives at Carlton include a robust recycling program, a composting program, extensive cover cropping, and planting ditches with perennial grasses.

"They're just practical things, really," Elliott said. "If you do cover cropping and build better soil, the soil is in position to grow better crops in the future."

The grower has performed regular energy audits for more than 25 years, upgraded older structures to be more efficient, and included efficiency features in new structures. "I think it's something that started gradually and has built over time," said Elliott, who also worked for former owner Gordon Bailey and, prior to that, the Brooks family. "Part of it is that the business is tied so strongly to the land and water. These are important parts of our production process, and need to be protected."

Carlton has found that doing right by the environment often has its unanticipated benefits. The nursery installed raptor poles, attracting birds that cut down on rodents in production areas. The nursery took out brush and poison oak and replaced it with beneficial shrubs and trees for wildlife. The nursery planted its ditches with perennial grasses, keeping out weeds and preventing the need for herbicides, while filtering runoff.

Although Bartch likes to give Elliott the credit for these successes, Elliott points to the owner's leadership. "Jon is a very quiet and modest man, but he really is the driving force around here," Elliott said.

### Growing up in the business

Jon grew up in Minnesota, the son of Ed, a retail nursery owner. His mother, Ginny, owned a stained glass business. "From them, I learned that hard work could get you a long ways, and maybe get you over the valleys or hard spots that come along," Bartch said.

His grandfather was Gordon Bailey, who cofounded Minnesota-based powerhouse Bailey Nurseries with his brother, John Vincent Bailey.

In other words, Jon had no shortage of role models in business or the green industry. He always knew that he'd end up working in nurseries, one way or the other. "I've been involved in it all my life," he said. "Did I know I would end up in Oregon, or here, or owning a nursery? No."

As a student, he worked summers for a variety of nurseries — Bailey Nurseries, Bachman's Floral Gift and Garden, and his father's business, Arnie's. He earned a bachelor's degree in horticulture from the University of Minnesota and a master of business administration degree from the College of St. Thomas.

In 1986, he moved to Oregon. "Ultimately, I think I was drawn to the people at the nursery, and in the area," Bartch said. His grandfather, Gordon Bailey, had just purchased Carlton Plants from the founding Brooks family.

"I think he bought Carlton for its people, not just its reputation," Bartch said. "Without our people and our customers, we wouldn't have much."

Bailey put young Jon to work in different parts of the operation, wherever help was needed. Although Bailey was still involved at Bailey Nurseries, he visited Carlton frequently to check up on things. "People would look forward to his visits with great anticipation," Bartch said. "He had a very significant impact on many people here at the nursery."

Bailey was known for a plain-spoken, common sense approach, and for his fairness. "He didn't come out and say it, but he loved to watch people grow," Barch said. "He gave people a lot of freedom. He put it out there on the table. He didn't force people. He might have tapped you one or more times."

"He was growing the company as he was growing all of us," Elliott said. "He was a man of not a lot of words, but strong actions and strong leadership."

Bailey often believed in employees before they believed in themselves.

"He pushed people ahead of their time, to things they didn't know they could do," Barch said. "In the end, they ended up the better for it."

Barch became one example of that when his grandfather appointed him as Carlton's general manager in 1991.

"We were having a company dinner — it might have been an awards night — and he kind of dinged his glass and announced it, without any prior hint it was going to happen," Barch said.

"Jon was surprised, but I don't know that other people were surprised," Elliott said. "It was the right thing at the right time."

By Barch's admission, the promotion came "at an early age, with a lot to learn." However, he benefitted from "a lot of help from people who had been here a long time," such as Elliott and customer relationship manager Dick Bocci. They've served as excellent mentors, he said.

Barch also benefitted from his grandfather's mentorship until Gordon passed away in 1995. In 1997, Barch purchased the nursery from his grandfather's estate, and has owned it for the past 14 years. As owner, he has tried to carry on his grandfather's example.

"Autonomy is a word that's used a lot here. That's what we like to instill in people," Barch said.

Following in his grandfather's footsteps also includes supporting the environmental initiatives that Elliott has spearheaded. "I think Gordon respected

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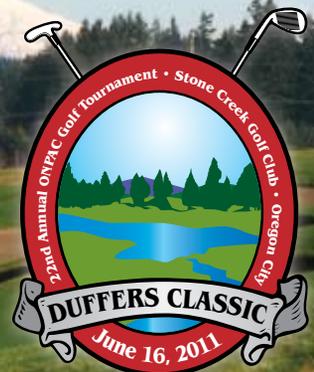
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the land, and so do I," Barch said. "Whether they call it stewardship or husbandry or whatever, it's not a fad to Allan, and it wasn't to Gordon or to me."

### Looking forward

As Carlton moves forward into the future, Barch has vowed that the nursery will never stand still. "Change isn't always easy, but it's good," Barch said.

Barch credits a beneficial growing environment for helping Carlton succeed, meaning not just the climate and soil, but also the people. "The industry in general, and especially here in Oregon, has been very open to working with each other and helping each other within reason," he said. "There's cooperation in the industry — customers and competitors — and we call on each other for advice."

Barch feels that industry cooperation sets the bar higher, and everyone benefits. "These are tough times, and the industry is too small not to work together at the state or national levels," he said.

The Oregon Association of Nurseries plays a key role by fostering cooperation and being a strong advocate, Barch said. The OAN's leaders are placing a high priority on meeting member needs. "I'm very enthusiastic about the current leadership at the OAN, and very excited about the outreach to the members," he said.

As for the future of Carlton and other growers, people's concern for the environment bodes well, he said. Trees, shrubs, grasses have so many benefits for people. They reduce heating and cooling costs, filter the air and water, beautify the environment and much more.

"There's a general interest in improving our world and leaving things better than we found it," he said. "The product we produce is a good fit for making our environment and our world a better place. Based on that, there is a good future for the nursery industry."

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*Curt Kipp is publications manager for the Oregon Association of Nurseries and managing editor of Digger magazine. Reach him at [ckipp@oan.org](mailto:ckipp@oan.org) or 503-582-2008.*

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