



Truly connected

Greg and Tamara Clift enjoy growing their relationships with plants, customers and each other

Tamara and Greg Clift like to bring a spirit of fun to McKenzie River Nursery. This includes the matching flamingo shirts they and their employees often wear to work.

McKenzie River Nursery

Founded: 1968

Products and services: Retail and wholesale grower of bedding plants, hanging baskets, vegetable starts and perennials. They also sell trees and shrubs to their retail customers.

Location: 38698 Camp Creek Road, Springfield, Ore.

Owners: Greg and Tamara Clift

Web: www.mckenzierivernursery.com

Curt Kipp

For nursery owners Greg and Tamara Clift, a happy and successful business experience is all about making personal connections.

McKenzie River Nursery draws on customers from Eugene and Springfield all the way up the McKenzie River valley to the small community of McKenzie Bridge. However, they also get business from people who come from as far away as Sisters and Bend, which are located on the other side of the Cascades.

“We’re trying to sell our personalities in a way, and the fact that it’s friendly here, as opposed to selling a lot of plants on a small margin,” Greg said.

They don’t view mass-market retailers as competitors, because the big boxes can’t offer the same personal service and plant knowledge they do.

“We’re truly a neighborhood nursery,” Greg said.

“I enjoy the flowers and the people,” Tamara said. “You don’t get negative people buying plants. It’s generally happy or contented people who buy plants.”

Retail makes up three-fourths of the nursery’s business, with wholesale making up the other 25 percent. The

▲ MEMBER PROFILE: MCKENZIE RIVER NURSERY

nursery grows bedding plants for landscapers, and sells hanging baskets to several small merchants around the area.

One of McKenzie River Nursery's signature retail offerings is its annual hanging basket workshop, held every March. More than 100 people typically come out to the nursery to participate.

Greg and Tamara walk the customers through the art of putting together a hanging basket. They are turned loose to select plants from the nursery's greenhouses, and then they assemble them in one basket.

"We keep the baskets until May," Greg said. "When the customers come back for them, they're nice and showy."

Tomatoes are another specialty. The nursery grows them from seed.

The nursery employs up to six people during its busiest times of the year,

many of whom are neighbors.

"We're still a small business," Greg said. "For a good portion of the year, it's just the two of us, during the offseason."

Small beginnings

The nursery got its start in 1968, when Tamara's father, Elwood Mathew, purchased the 30-acre nursery site. It was then an orchard growing apples, peaches and cherries.

"When my dad bought it, he bought himself a job," Tamara said. "He was tired of the office."

The business initially was called McKenzie River Orchards, but Elwood soon shifted his focus. "There wasn't enough money in produce, so he decided to go into bedding plants and vegetable starts," she said.

At the time, the nursery had just

three greenhouses (one of which is still standing today). He set to work on expanding to seven greenhouses. Tamara and Greg later added an eighth.

When the Mathew family moved to the farm, Tamara was in the fourth grade. She spent the remainder of her childhood working on the nursery and learning from her father. Her mother, Alyce Mathew, worked outside the home as a school teacher.

Although Tamara spent some time away from the farm when she went to college and got married, she returned and took over when her dad was ready to retire in 1995.

"I did come home," she said.

Although Tamara's dad passed away in 2005, her mother is still living on the farm and occasionally helps out with the business.

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An extension agent from Wisconsin

Greg came to Oregon in 1987. He had worked in Wisconsin as an extension agent, but journeyed west for post-graduate horticulture studies at Oregon State University in Corvallis. He gained employment as an agronomist at the Eugene Farmers Co-Op, where Tamara became one of his customers.

After the death of Tamara's first husband, Greg and Tamara started dating and were married in 1997.

Greg often says that he married into the nursery business. "It was a perfect match," he said. "We both grew up on small farms. I always wanted a nursery. She had a nursery."

Greg continued his work at the co-op until 2000, when it closed and sold many of its assets to the Wilco cooperative. From then on, he devoted his full-time efforts to the nursery.

Prior to Greg's involvement, the business was strictly bedding plants. His expertise in horticulture allowed the nursery to expand its offerings to include an increasing variety of trees and shrubs.

Tamara and Greg's abilities have proven complementary to each other. Tamara uses her business expertise (business degree from the University of Oregon) to work on bookkeeping, and also taps her knowledge of bedding plants. Greg uses his knowledge of horticulture.

Not every couple was made to work together, but the Clifts enjoy it. Tamara joked that biting one's tongue is the secret of being married and happily in business together.

Greg agreed. "For me, it's loving the other person so much, they can't do anything wrong," he said.

"And it's all small stuff," Tamara added. "Nothing is so big it's worth fighting over."

Greg and Tamara have a long record of service in the Oregon Association of Nurseries. Greg served as president of the Emerald Empire chapter in 1994-95. "I'm a joiner and also a compulsive doer," Greg said.

Tamara served as chapter president in 2005-06 and is serving again currently, with Greg's help.

The Clifts are also active in the local community. They provide decorative baskets for the small community of Walterville, which has a shopping center and is just up the road. This has helped build their reputation for premium hanging baskets.

Growing a social network

Tamara and Greg are optimistic about the future of the nursery business. They have begun to use Facebook to grow their relationships with customers. That in turn leads to increased sales.

"With social networking, we can stay in touch with people all the time," Greg said.

Tamara and Greg may love plants, but it's their relationships with customers that make their business the most satisfying.

"I go crazy in the middle of December when there's no one here and all we are doing is fixing benches," Greg said. "Once people start coming in, that's when I like it because then you can talk to someone."

"Besides each other," Tamara said.

In season, from April to July, the nursery is open seven days a week. Tamara and Greg are there every day. The pride of ownership motivates them.

"You wouldn't want to do it for someone else seven days a week, but you can do it for yourself," Greg said.

They have no huge expansion plans, but will simply continue to do what they love. Tamara likes to summarize it with her four P's. Which stand for?

"Pretty, practical, perfect plants," she said. ☺

Curt Kipp is the publications manager of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, and the managing editor of Digger magazine. You may reach him at ckipp@oan.org or 503-582-2008, or follow him on Twitter at @diggermag (www.twitter.com/diggermag).

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