



Don Marjama Nursery Co. Inc.

Sandy, Ore.

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Don Marjama Nursery Co. Inc. was founded by Don Marjama (center) and his wife, Le'Ann, in 1975. They still operate the business today, with help from their sons Brad (left), Ryan (next to Brad) and Tim (right).

There's quite a collection of foreign currency under the front counter glass at Don Marjama Nursery.

Take a look. You'll see bills and coins from the Philippines, Turkey, Vietnam, Germany (circa the Weimar Republic, 1922), Moldova, Mexico, Iraq (under Saddam Hussein), New Zealand, Poland, Canada, Kuwait and the European Union.

The nursery's general manager, Tim Marjama, doesn't remember how the collection got started, but it has grown through a simple process: when people see it, they can't resist adding to it.

"Truckers come in here and say, 'I have something you don't have,'" Tim said.

Personal connections building a business. That process has enabled Don Marjama Nursery to transform, over time, from a backyard growing operation to a 267-acre powerhouse with seven different farms, all located under

the towering presence of Oregon's majestic Mt. Hood.

From the beginning, founders Don and Le'Ann Marjama have emphasized the personal touch in running their business. Their first customers were Ed and Jimmy Porter in Smithville, Tenn.

"After all these years, we still ship to Jimmy and see them at trade shows," Don said. "Longevity is the key."

In those early years, Don often made long road trips, personally delivering the nursery's products to the customers. One year, Don logged 150,000 miles in his truck. After a few years, eldest son Tim was delivering as well.

Eventually, the nursery had too many customers for the family to make personal deliveries. But to this day, when you purchase nursery stock direct from Don Marjama Nursery, or visit their booth at one of 11 trade shows they

attend, you'll be dealing directly with an owner — either Don or Le'Ann, or one of their three sons.

"At trade shows, you're either going to see Don or Tim or I, or (younger sons) Ryan or Brad," Le'Ann said. "When I see customers at trade shows, I know their kids and their grandkids. Ours is a nice industry to be involved in, and it's because we have so many families involved."

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— Le'Ann Marjama

The nursery was founded in 1975, when Don was a building contractor. The idea came to him when he was taking classes to obtain his private pilot's license. One of his classmates was a nursery owner, John Holmlund.

They became friends, and Holmlund soon suggested that Don try growing plants in his backyard. He was getting out of container growing, and was willing to sell some of his to Don.

"I guess one thing led to another," Don said. "After one year of growing plants in my backyard, I figured this was a lot better down the road."

He continued with contracting, but the nursery grew. "We did that side by side," Don said. "I was wearing two hats — carpenter and nurseryman."

Le'Ann's contributions were equally valuable. She had grown up on a farm, and wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty.

"(Don) said I could plant faster than anybody else," she joked, "because my hands could keep up with my mouth,"

"The encouragement she has given over the years, and her willingness to be involved in the business has made a big difference," Don said.

In 1984, Don and Le'Ann made the decision to purchase their flagship site, an 80-acre farm with a gorgeous Mt. Hood view, from Bill McCoy. This major move coincided with the decision to add field-grown stock, which today makes up about 50 percent of what the nursery ships. The nursery also began to add deciduous varieties, such as dogwoods and Japanese maples, because customers were asking for them.

"People would say, 'What else do you grow? You're from Oregon. Can you grow us some dogwoods?'" Don said. "That was a good move we made. It is a big part of our business now."

By around 1990, Don realized he had to decide between contracting and being a grower. "We decided to do the best thing," he said. "So far, it's been one of the best decisions we've ever made, to go into the nursery business, for us and for our family."

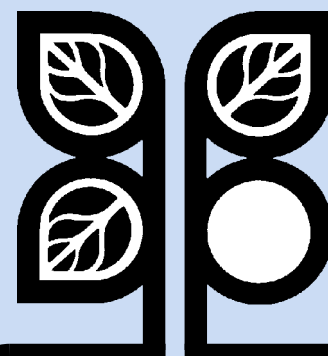
The Marjamas are big believers in the value of Oregon's climate, which is particularly conducive to growing trees and shrubs. "That's why it's been so successful as a growing state, and we're thankful for it," Don said.

The weather is pleasantly sunny in the summer, and mildly cold in the winter. The winter cool gives hardy stock healthy dormancy period, so that spring growth comes out strong. It also comes earlier than in other states with colder winters.

The result is beautiful trees and shrubs that get up to size more quickly, so customers get better value, even after the cost of shipping is figured in.

"No matter where you go, customers say that when that Oregon stock comes

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off the truck, you can tell," Le'Ann said. "It has a special sheen to it."

Western Oregon rains are abundant from October through April. This allows Marjama's selection of grafted conifers, evergreens, deciduous and flowering shade trees, dogwoods, and topiaries to stay lush. "You can't do it with irrigation water," Don said. "It's that rain that comes from above."

They have 183 varieties in their catalog in many sizes, from one-gallon containers to 12-foot trees. A favorite selection is dwarf Alberta spruce. "We do more numbers in that than anything, and customers know that," Don said. "They know they'll get a quality plant."

Products are shipped everywhere in the United States and Canada.

Impressive though it may be, the collection of coins and bills is not the main thing that gets visitors talking. That would be the collection of topiaries near the entrance.

"The biggest thing we get compliments on is our topiary plants," Don said. "(People) drive in the gate and say, 'This is different.'"

The second thing people notice is the neatness of the nursery. The fields are kept in immaculate condition, and the combination of that and the Mt. Hood view blows people away.

"Time and time again, when I'm finished with the tour, people say it's the cleanest nursery they've seen," Tim said.

But the most lasting impression is made by the quality nursery stock that Don Marjama Nursery sells. "That's the key," Don said. "Quality. That's what we hear at all the trade shows."

The owners say the credit belongs to the employees of the company. Deserving particular kudos are two brothers, Joe and Jesus Bautista, who have worked there since 1984.

"Our top 15 employees have been here 18 years or longer," Tim said. "We have an incredible crew."

"It's those people who have made the business as good as it is," Don said. "We're the owners, but it's the employees that do the work." ☺