

Crop Man



BLUEBERRY CLAN: David Brazelton and son Cort, along with other family and partnership members, play pivotal roles in Fall Creek. David's daughter and son-in-law, Amelie and Boris Aust, along with company partners Gregg and Becky Vollstedt, also play active roles in the Lowell, Ore., firm.

Farmers enter 31st year as blueberry craze grows

By T.J. BURNHAM

WHEN the Brazeltons and the Vollstedts purchased the diminutive Blueberry Hills Nursery near Lowell, Ore., 30 years ago this month, none realized they were christening a world-class wholesale operation.

Producing plants for the commercial and nursery trade today from five sites, Fall Creek Farm & Nursery Inc. also runs a varietal-development research farm and enjoys sublicenses in Europe, Africa and South America, making it a top player in its field globally.

"We're strictly blueberries," explains President David Brazelton. A lot of blueberries, that is, with Fall Creek producing up to 10 million plants annually, a far leap from the few acres of blueberries the two families originally purchased to grow the crop.

Owned by David and wife Barbara, along with partners Gregg and Becky Vollstedt, Fall Creek has jockeyed into a leading industry post where customer satisfaction is as important as sales. "Our strength is in good stock and with service after the sale," insists David. "We've built our reputation on customer satisfaction."

Marking what David proclaims to be "steady annual growth" through the years up to this anniversary month, he credits the "healthy nature" of blueberries as the engine for much of this success. Enter the antioxidant aspect of blueberries, proclaimed to be a health exponent in foods, as the prime pump for a growth that has boosted what was a 400-acre Oregon crop 30 years ago to

Key Points

- Oregon's blueberry industry is experiencing a hot market.
- Fall Creek nursery works closely with industry needs.
- The family operation celebrates its 30th anniversary this month.

about 5,000. Officially, there were 4,600 acres in the state last year, the latest National Agricultural Statistics Service Oregon Berry report reveals.

Value spike

Notably, while this acreage bumped up only about 600 acres between 2005 and 2007, value of utilized production leaped from \$33 million to \$67 million over the same period.

That kind of margin promise for the commercial industry has geared up the market power of the nursery sector.

None of Oregon's other berries come close by comparison with this value. In fact, all caneberries (raspberries, blackberries, boysenberries, loganberries and marionberries) together represent \$39 million, well down from the 2005 level of \$57 million, according to the NASS stats.

"This is an exciting time of growth for our industry," David says. "Many new growers are coming in, and we work with third-generation blueberry producers. Our success reflects that maturity of this business."

A vigorous growth in home gardener demand — Fall Creek



TOMORROW'S CROPS: Nursery and commercial blueberry stock matures at Fall Creek for an industry where growing annual demand for such plant materials is expected to remain strong.

calls this its "nursery trade" element — has spiraled due to the health exponent of the crop, he points out. "The linkage with health, with eating healthy foods, which began in the late '90s, has been a major market growth factor," says David.

Blueberries, one of the first of these so-called "nutriceutical" foods identified by researchers, enjoys what industry calls a "health halo," lending steam to what David calls "skyrocketing demand."

Underscoring such claims is the 50 million-pound record production for Oregon this year for the state's 300 commercial producers, many who are counted as Fall Creek clients.

"Our blueberry industry has truly been one of the bright

spots in Oregon agriculture this decade," says Oregon Department of Agriculture Director Katy Coba. Not every day, she adds, do you find a crop with 100% production growth in just three years.

While the industry is thriving, Fall Creek isn't easing back on what it considers its strongest asset of success: customer service.

"We go out and find out what our customers need in new varieties, and we work on getting them what they need," says Cort Brazelton, David's son who heads up the firm's Chilean operation. "If our customers continue to succeed, that sustains our business."

For more information, see www.fallcreeknursery.com.

Complex study yields nematode control

By T.J. BURNHAM

WHEN Guiping Yan launched into details about her scientific probe of nematode research, some at the Sherman Station field tour in Moro, Ore., may have wondered what all of her complicated work meant to farmers.

If their minds wandered during her initial explanation of molecular diagnosis, they focused sharply by the time the Oregon State University pathology research associate answered that question: unprecedented nematode control in wheat.

"Molecular diagnosis work enables commercial labs to improve services to better identify nematodes," she said. The crux of her study is that

while there may be controls for some nematodes like the root-lesion and cereal cyst, not all pests that fall under those labels are the same. As a result, some labs aren't offering tests to tell growers which type they're fighting. Without such diagnosis, control efforts may fall short.

What Yan's work provides is a way for labs to do so for the first time.

"Mostly, this will help growers select the proper varieties for specific nematode resistance," she notes. "Also, recognizing the species in the lab will help improve resistance breeding work for wheat."

Yan's work provides a method for labs to identify specific species is an important breakthrough for growers, said Richard Smiley, an OSU plant



IN A NUTSHELL: OSU plant pathology research associate Guiping Yan focuses on how her complicated work with molecular diagnosis can yield important nematode information for wheat.

pathologist. "Knowing which species you have plays a role in management and makes a dif-

ference in which crops, such as barley, work best to reduce populations," he said.