

Nursery woman adds retail, mail order to wholesale business

By JAN JACKSON
For the Capital Press

SALEM — When the wholesale nursery market fell in 2008, Lucile Whitman knew she had to do something different to save her business. She decided to try shipping 1¼-inch caliper and larger full-branched trees across the country to retail customers.

It worked.

“I cater to the people all over the country who want to plant ornamental trees and shrubs big enough to make a statement at the time of planting,” Lucile said. “I grow and ship the trees in root control bags and hit them with an anti-transpirant spray just before I send them off. They arrive

looking like they left here only three minutes before.”

But she said she found that the retail business is different.

“Unlike wholesale, retail requires a lot more counseling about whether or not a plant will do well in a given location,” she said.

The hot, dry weather has also had an impact.

“The changing weather patterns are also making a difference as to what I can recommend,” she said. “For instance, Crape Myrtle is the hottest seller right now and it is blooming a full month early here in the Willamette Valley and Seattle as well. These weather changes are making a difference.”

Lucile was born and raised

Whitman Farms

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on a small hobby farm outside Atlanta, Ga. She had no real farm experience in 1980, when she and her former husband bought a rundown 35-acre hazelnut orchard in West Salem, Ore.

“I had a doctorate in Latin and Greek and I thought I could teach at schools like Willamette University,” Lucile said. “However, when I got here, I found that schools here didn’t offer classes in Latin and Greek. We bought this place to keep me busy. Because I barely knew the difference between a dogwood and a pine tree, the first thing I did was sign up for how-to-farm classes at Chemeketa Community College.

“By the time the classes were over, I had asked for a chain saw for Christmas so I could go to work on the place.”

That was 30 years ago.

“I still don’t like to sit in the office to do paper work and answer the phone,” Whitman said. “I want to graft and prune and



Jan Jackson/For the Capital Press

Lucile Whitman of Whitman Farms stands in the shade of a mulberry tree growing at her nursery, which features hard-to-find trees and shrubs. To handle retail sales, she transfers her office phone to her cellphone so she can work outside the office.

pot, and to do that I wear my phone on my belt and my ear bud in my ears. I keep a pocket full of note cards to write orders on that I can then transfer to the computer.”

Whitman Farms specializes

in hard-to-find trees and shrubs, including many varieties of currants. Affectionately called the “Mulberry Queen” because of her extensive collection of mulberry trees, Lucile’s latest project is researching crops to

plant on her newly purchased 40 acres. She is asking everyone she knows for ideas.

“I’m thinking of trying something organic but first I need organic certification from the State of Oregon,” she said.



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