

Operations remain all in the family

By **CRAIG REED**
For the Capital Press

ELKTON, Ore. — When Howard Carnes died in 1996, his three grown grandchildren were faced with deciding what to do with the family ranch along the Umpqua River.

Lisa Davis doesn't remember exactly how the decision was made, but the siblings concluded, with the blessing of their grandmother, Frances Carnes, to grow trees and shrubs on the fertile bottomland.

"I guess the nursery business at that time was booming so somehow we decided to grow our own plants and trees," said Davis, who was

joined in the decision-making by her older brother, Lincoln Russell, and her twin sister, Lynette Sky.

The result was the planting of seedlings in 1997 and the development of BR Nursery at the Bend in the River Ranch. A few years later after the seedlings had grown into young trees, the nursery needed a retail outlet. A partnership was formed with Mike Cunningham of Drain, who had opened a landscape business on the south side of Sutherlin, Ore. One year later in 2001, the brother and his sisters purchased that business and at about the same time bought a water garden business.

Sutherlin WaterGarden & Nursery was opened. The business sells trees and shrubs grown at BR, landscaping materials and water garden and pond products, including koi fish.

"We love the business," said Russell who manages the Sutherlin business with help from his wife, Elena. "The family has fun going to work together, working together, getting everything figured out. We have a meeting in the morning to discuss what we want to do. Everybody has molded into their own roles, who does what. It's working."

Lisa Davis manages BR Nursery and is helped by sis-

ter Lynette, and their cousin Bryce Carnes. The two businesses have no other employees other than the five family members.

"Business-wise we do pretty well," Davis said. "When we do have disagreements, we're all pretty-level headed about it."

Frances Carnes died in 2001. Davis said her grandmother liked the direction the ranch had taken in establishing a nursery.

The sibling partners admitted the learning curve was steep in the early going because they had no experience growing trees. Davis said during the first winter they thought all their first plantings had died because there were no leaves. But with spring and warmer weather, leaves grew and so did the knowledge of the planters.

After more years of clear-

ing Scotch broom and blackberries and 17 years after the first planting, Davis said the BR Nursery has close to 10,000 plants and shrubs in the ground or in pots, representing 300 to 350 species. The nursery also has four hoop houses and a greenhouse.

"We have a lot of unusual stuff growing here that you won't find anywhere else," Davis said. "If you're looking for something unique, I have it."

After a few years of growth, the trees and shrubs are potted and taken to Sutherlin Water Garden & Nursery to sell.

The partners said if they had paid for their plant inventory, their businesses would not have survived the past recession because business dropped about 60 percent over several years. They had previously sold products to eight nurseries on the Oregon Coast,

BR Nursery and Sutherlin WaterGarden and Nursery

Owners: Lincoln Russell and sisters Lisa Davis and Lynette Sky.

Where: Elkton and Sutherlin, Ore.

Information: 541-459-5169

but six of those are no longer in business. The decline in construction during the recession years also hurt sales.

Davis said sales stabilized in 2011 and 2012, and there's been an uptick in business the past couple of years, both with residential customers and contractors. By growing their own trees, family members believe they can "outsize and outprice" competitors.

"People have been coming back," Russell said. "People who come in here don't want to wait for a tree to grow. They want one that's already got some size."



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