

Alpha Nursery treats employees like family

By **JANAE SARGENT**
Capital Press

Doug Zeilinski, owner of Alpha Nursery, credits his employees with the growth and success of his business.

Alpha Nursery is a family-owned container nursery that sells more than 750 varieties of plants across the U.S.

Started in 1978 by Zeilinski, a 23-year-old Oregon State University college graduate, it has grown from 3 acres to 150 and bases its success on innovation, diversification and employee empowerment.

One of those employees is RJ Tancredi, general manager, who has been at the nursery 36



Janae Sargent/Capital Press

Doug Zeilinski, owner of Alpha Nursery, sits in his office. Zeilinski started the container nursery when he was 23. It has grown to a 150-acre operation.

years, since it was started. He remembers walking through the original property with Zeilinski and imagining the future.

"I grew up with this program, a lot of us did," said Tancredi. "This was my first job and will probably be my last."

Tancredi is the longest-tenured employee at Alpha Nursery but not the only one that has made Alpha a career. Zeilinski said at least two dozen of his 50 employees have been at Alpha at least 15 years.

When employees reach the 15-year mark, Zeilinski gives them a gold Alpha Nursery watch as a way to commemorate their place at the company.

Employee value and empowerment is a cornerstone that is honored far before employees reach their 15-year mark.

Alpha Nursery maintains a full-time staff of 38 crew workers and 12 staff. Every employee at Alpha has received health insurance, vacation and sick pay for the last 15 years. Zeilinski and the other managers conduct reviews and report cards for each employee to determine bonuses and rais-

es, honor outstanding employees with plaques, hold regular barbecues and parties and even let employees name the equipment they work with.

"If we didn't have them, we wouldn't have this," Zeilinski said.

Family is another part of the nursery's growth; Tancredi said he ended up being "Uncle RJ" to Zeilinski's two sons, Scott and Josh.

Scott Zeilinski now manages the Zeilinski farm in Keizer, Ore., and Josh works at the nursery in nearby Salem.

Zeilinski originally grew up on the farm with his dad, Ernie. He said having the farm has allowed the nursery to take more risks and has helped offset times when the nursery didn't bring in as much money as other years.

Josh said he remembers working with the irrigation crew when he was 6 for 75 cents an hour to save up to buy Teenage

Mutant Ninja Turtle action figures at K-Mart.

After graduating from Pepperdine University and working at a large California nursery, Josh returned to Alpha to get back to the way a family nursery operates.

"It's more fun working at a place like this," he said. "We have a lot less employees so we get to know everyone personally."

Doug Zeilinski said Josh is always out working with the grounds crew to get to know them and to get out of his office.

Tancredi joked that when he dies, his wife will have to sprinkle his ashes at the nursery because he's put so much of his heart into it.

"I'm not a religious person but I have a lot of faith and this nursery is about as close to church as it can get," Tancredi said.

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