

Farm produces hazelnut trees through micropropagation

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

Propagation has become the major focus at the Ron Chapin hazelnut farm near Salem.

Chapin, who owns and operates the orchards with sons Larry and Paul and nephews Jeff, Steve and Caleb, said the idea is to maintain a cash flow while their young orchards reach maturity. As with farmers across the Willamette Valley, they must plant new varieties as traditional varieties fall to eastern filbert blight.

“We’ve been pushing the nursery business because we’re going to go through a period of time when we have young trees and no old, producing orchards which is going to be a little bit tight cash-flow wise,” Chapin said.

Chapin runs a bare root



Brenna Wiegand/For the Capital Press

Ron Chapin and Travis Adams utilize micropropagation techniques to grow hazelnut trees for Chapin Farms and other orchards.

nursery and micropropagation operation at the 700-acre family farm. In past years, they’ve grown volumes of the Jefferson variety but are switching gears in an attempt to keep up

with a growing demand for Webster and are relying on the speed of layering versus tissue culture to grab the business at hand.

“We’re trying real hard to

get these things into our layering program because when we put a tissue cultured tree in the ground we have a two-year wait before we can harvest a bare root tree,” Chapin said. “However, without tissue and just relying on grafting and layering to multiply the trees for our layering beds, it would take a decade to do what we do in two years.”

Travis Adams is Chapin’s partner in the micropropagation business and manages the laboratory, where Adams has a bumper crop of Webster trees underway.

Chapin got into micropropagation eight years ago while his daughter Nicole was pursuing her horticulture degree at Oregon State University. She came home excited about the hazelnut micropropagation going on there. Through trial, error and lots of help from

others, the lab is now producing nicely and predictably.

“There is always something but we’ve been able to work our way through it; even the volume of the container makes a big difference,” Adams said. “I feel like everything we’ve done right has been by people giving us really good advice and trying to replicate that within the budget we have. We may do things differently such as using Saran wrap on Mason jars, but it’s working really well.”

This year the lab will serve about 15 customers, up from last year’s six, and is on track to produce 150,000 plants. Ron has about 60 bare root customers and will also produce 150,000 trees in addition to some 40,000-50,000 potted varieties. Together, it’s enough to cover 1,500-2,000 acres.

“It is a nice little business,”

Chapin said. “There’s a lot of excitement in the hazelnut industry right now because of the prices. You go to the industry meetings and the attendance has doubled or tripled.”

Eastern filbert blight, which could have been the death knell of the industry, is slowly being defeated as farmers replace dying orchards with the sturdy, disease-resistant varieties coming out of Oregon State.

“Without those we would be in a sorry state as an industry,” Chapin said. “Instead, orchards are going in all over the place.”

Chapin’s own orchards yield 3,500-4,000 pounds of nuts an acre, though it’s been as high as 5,000. He’s hoping the new varieties perform similarly — and sooner rather than later.

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