

Peoria Gardens pursues sustainability

By ALIYA HALL
Capital Press

JUNCTION CITY, Ore. — Peoria Gardens takes pride in being sustainable, whether it involves the environment or employees.

Having taken over the business from his father four years ago, Ben Verhoeven, president and general manager of Peoria Gardens, is passionate about social issues. He also hopes to continue the legacy of sustainability his father pursued since founding the business in 1983.

“Dad always treated employees with respect and with benefits. Some of the employees have been around for 20 to 30 years. They are good people, fun and hardworking. I feel strongly about their benefits,” he said.

Peoria Gardens offers 12 weeks of paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers, overtime pay, paid vacation, sick leave and health and dental insurance.

“It’s the right thing to do. It’s not that much money. It isn’t free, but it has a much bigger, more positive effect.



Aliya Hall/Capital Press

Ben Verhoeven has been running Peoria Gardens for four years. His family has owned the company since 1983.

“Agriculture is a different beast, there are complicated factors involved; we’re at the whim of mother nature.”

Ben Verhoeven, president and general manager of Peoria Gardens

I wish more people would do that,” said Verhoeven. “It feels good and it’s worth it. It helps people out.”

The nursery is also environmentally sustainable, selling annuals, perennials and vegetable starts.

“The veggie starts market has grown as more people are growing their own food. There’s been an increase in

our certified organic, and we want to expand that production,” Verhoeven said.

The biggest challenge in maintaining sustainability is pest control. Environmentally friendly insecticides are not always easy to use, he said.

Verhoeven also said that the nursery industry uses a lot of electricity as a whole,

and he’s trying to minimize that. Peoria Gardens has solar panels on two-thirds of its buildings and has already reduced its energy use by 30 percent.

“No one likes paying utility bills. This is better for the bottom line and the long term,” he said.

However, Verhoeven said there’s always more to do.

The nursery finished up its harvest season despite the “awful” spring that was early and wet, he said.

“Agriculture is a different beast, there are complicated factors involved; we’re at

the whim of mother nature,” he said. “But we came out of it.”

Other nurseries have followed Peoria Gardens’ sustainable example. Although there is a bad connotation with the word “sustainable” within certain groups, the Oregon Association of Nurseries is using the term to showcase efficiency.

California and Washington already have similar benefits programs in place for their employees. Verhoeven said he would have loved to see Oregon be the

first, but now that they are following suit other producers can see that the businesses haven’t suffered or cost them as much as they initially thought.

“I like being sustainable, environmentally and socially. I’m a new father myself, and anyone you know is either a parent or has been really sick before. These life events happen to everyone. We, as the agricultural industry, need to agree to help our neighbors out because they’ll help us out,” Verhoeven said.

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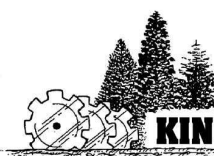


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