

Childhood business becomes successful life's passion

By **SHERYL HARRIS**
For the Capital Press

OAKVILLE, Wash. — Not everybody begins his career at age 10, but Dan Pearson did — with a detour for a college degree and eight years working as a landscape architect.

Meanwhile, he worked to build what his mother had named Dan's Dahlias back when he was that 10-year-old.

"My goal was to grow the business to where it made more than my day job. College was valuable, but I earn more doing this," he says, gesturing to his small dahlia farm.

It started when his father brought home 30 differ-



Sheryl Harris/For the Capital Press
Dan Pearson, left, and 9-year-old Collin cut blooms for market.

ent dahlias, and young Dan promptly memorized the names. The next year there were 30 more. People stopped by, asking about the flowers, and Dan cut and sold them for



Dan Pearson, owner of Dan's Dahlias, is one of largest dahlia growers in the Northwest. This beauty is "Evening Lady."

\$1 a bunch. Today they are \$1 a stem.

Now, Dan's Dahlias in Oakville is the largest dahlia grower in Washington state.

"I've always had a passion for growing things," says Pearson. "I loved the animals on my parents' dairy farm, but I preferred growing things."

Pearson sold the family's farm in 1995, purchased his current 12 acres and added 5 more acres. He grows 500 dahlia varieties, companion plantings — sunflowers, asters, zinnias, statice and hypericum berries — and first-season raspberry vines for greenery in bouquets. Each year he discontinues 50 varieties and begins

50 new ones from an estimated 18,000 to 20,000 varieties.

Dan's Dahlias is mostly a one-man operation, but Pearson has seasonal employees to plant, weed and dig up and divide the tubers. He and his brother do the cut flowers in the fall.

Pearson is a founding member of the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market Cooperative. The co-op provides flowers to florists and event planners nearly year-round.

"As a group, the co-op can give grocery stores a steady supply of flowers for eight months, so they will work with us," he said. "Florists and event planners get fresher produce for less, and we get more than through typical wholesalers; we've doubled the proceeds from cut flower sales."

He also sells tubers.

"I can sell tubers 10 months of the year," he said. "About half my sales are on-line."

What are Pearson's plans? "I'm always searching for varieties with stronger stems, more blooms, and that produce more tubers."

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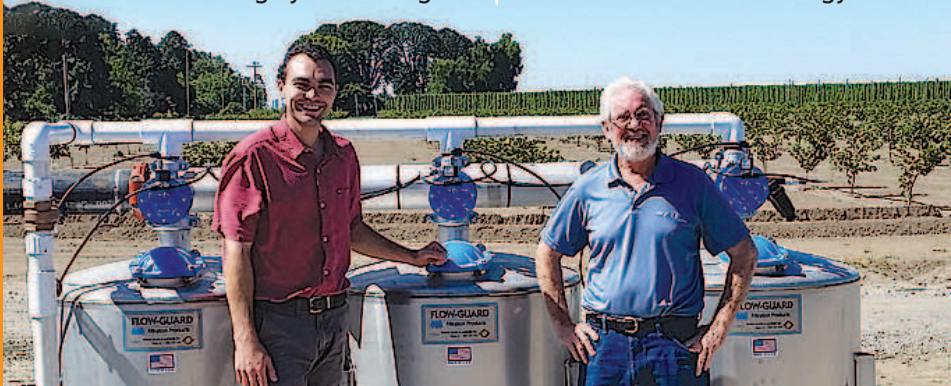
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