

Nursery still blossoms 108 years after opening

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

SAN RAFAEL, Calif. — Chris Untermann, manager of West End Nursery, says his green thumb is in his genes. “Leaving Germany in

search of the American dream, my great-great uncle and horticulturist Richard Lohrmann bought some land in San Rafael, California, in 1909,” Untermann said. “There, he opened a small neighborhood nursery serving

the community where he lived and worked.”

Lohrmann sold the operation to his nephew, Karl Untermann in the 1960s. Chris Untermann is the fourth generation to operate the nursery.

Chris Untermann worked

at the nursery through his high school and college years on weekends and whenever he was available. He started full-time 20 years ago, after he graduated from the University of California-Davis with a degree in agriculture economics.

The sprawling operation boasts 2 acres of plant material purchased from wholesalers around California and Oregon.

All plants are geared to Northern California’s climate. “Japanese maples are our most popular and expensive plants that we sell,” he said. The prices range from \$50 for a small tree to around \$600 for ones over 15 feet.

But West End Nursery is about more than sales.

“In addition to sales, we spend a lot of time identifying plants for people,” Untermann said. “Customers bring in leaves or send pictures and we tell them what it is. We also help customers with problems they are having in their garden.”

The busiest time of the year is March to June, but the nursery’s Christmas House is also popular. The seasonal treat began in 1985 to create a niche market for well-priced, unique ornaments and decorations.

Over the last 30 years, it has grown to include more than 60 glittering trees, becoming a holiday tradition in the community.

Untermann said there has always been an interest in drought-resistant plants, and that demand has accelerated. A high percentage of the nursery’s plants are drought-tolerant. Highly efficient drought-tolerant plants also come from places like Australia, where they have more water problems than California.

Changes have been ongo-



Courtesy West End Nursery

Chris Untermann, manager of West End Nursery in San Rafael, Calif., says he solves customers plant and lawn problems with innovation and years of know-how.

ing but one thing remains constant: Every customer wants instant visual satisfaction, he said. Plants need to be in full color and good size to start — no more waiting for things to grow.

There are also challenges the founder in 1909 did not experience.

“On the upside, it is hard to ship a plant, so nurseries are fortunate to not have to try and compete against Amazon,” he said. “However, the big box stores are always a threat to independent nurseries, but as long as we can provide quality plants and quality service that is hard to find in other places, I think the nursery business should be fine.”

The only other fear is a major drought, he said, “though this last one was surprisingly not bad for business, as customers replaced lawns, but a five-plus-year drought could be disastrous.”

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