

People & Places

Breeder aims to restore markets

Ryan Contreras seeks sterile, disease-resistant ornamental plants

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

CORVALLIS, Ore. — Certain species of maple have earned a nasty reputation that plant breeder Ryan Contreras aims to change.

Norway and Amur maples are known to “escape cultivation” — a euphemism for becoming invasive — leading to restrictions in some parts of the U.S.

The problem has caused demand for these species to drop steeply over the past decade, with some nurseries reporting declines of up to 90 percent, said Contreras, associate professor of ornamental plant breeding at Oregon State University.

Creating sterile cultivars of these maples may allow them to regain their former popularity in New England and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Contreras is also breeding for sterility in other maple varieties commonly grown in Oregon to save them from a similar fate.

“We want to restore one market while maintaining the other,” he said.

Seeking sterility

Sterility can theoretically be achieved in maples with the same method that was used to create seedless bananas and watermelons — developing a plant with three sets of chromosomes instead of two.

In such plants, called triploids, the odd number of chromosomes prevents them from evenly splitting and pairing off during sexual reproduction, often preventing the for-



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Ryan Contreras, associate professor of ornamental plant breeding at Oregon State University, examines field trials of new varieties near Corvallis. Among his projects are sterile maples, intended to avoid becoming invasive, and cotoneaster that's resistant to fire blight, a bacterial disease.

mation of viable seed.

The process of creating triploids is time-consuming, though. Contreras first used chemical agents to create maples with four chromosome sets, then crossed them with maples with two chromosome sets.

“It renders them highly infertile but we don't know yet to what degree,” he said. “We won't know until these plants start flowering.”

In Contreras' view, it's easier to repopularize a once-common variety, such as Norway and Amur maples, than to educate landscapers and other plant buyers about an entirely new one.

This philosophy has also spurred his breeding of cotoneaster, a flowering plant in the rose family, to withstand fire blight.

While it's not a major problem in Oregon, pressure from the bacterial pathogen is strong in the Eastern U.S., where cotoneaster was once a prevalent landscape plant.

Due to their susceptibility to fire blight, demand for cotoneasters has dried up, Contreras said. “It's completely fallen out of favor.”

Even so, nursery growers still know how to cultivate the plant and landscapers remain familiar with it, he said.

Contreras is hoping to restore the cotoneaster's marketability with three cultivars that have been virtually symptom-free when exposed to the disease.

“The testing is ongoing,” Contreras said. “We want to confirm that under many environments and disease pressures, they're going to continue to perform as we've seen them perform.”

To that end, Contreras is cooperating with researchers at Kansas State University and Virginia Tech to see if his cotoneasters will thrive in other regions. The University of California-Davis is also analyzing their disease resistance and evaluating their drought tolerance.

Filling a niche

By focusing on long-term research that confers beneficial agronomic traits, Contreras is trying to fill a niche that's largely unoccupied by private breeders.

His goal isn't to compete with private companies that release new branded varieties every year.

“To make a splash, there needs to be lots of marketing behind it,” he said.

Even when his ultimate goal is breeding a cultivar that's sterile or disease resistant, he must still select for plants that are attractive.

“We throw away thousands of plants because they don't look good. They've got to look good,” he said.

A successful cultivar must be appealing to consumers, adaptable to production agriculture and easy to propagate, Contreras said. “If it doesn't have those three things, then it's pointless.”

Contreras grew up on a farm in eastern North Caroli-



Western Innovator

Ryan Contreras

Occupation: Ornamental plant breeder

Hometown: Corvallis, Ore.

Age: 39

Family: Wife, Megan, and two young children

Education: Bachelor's degree in horticultural science from North Carolina State University in 2002, master's degree in horticultural science from North Carolina State University in 2006, doctorate in horticulture from the University of Georgia in 2009.

na, raising hay, hogs and laying hens, then pursued a higher education in horticulture.

“For a while, I wanted to have a nursery, but I cured myself of that,” said Contreras.

While working at a nursery in college, the potential for financial calamity steered him toward a career in academia.

During his college years, Contreras took a deep dive into peanut breeding, but ended up returning to ornamental plants.

The genetics of peanuts and other major field crops have already been extensively researched, but the nursery industry still has a vast unexplored territory.

“Landscape plants are my passion. There's very little known about the genetics of woody plants,” Contreras said. “Everything we're learning is new.”

Meat class teaches butchery skills

By ALIYA HALL
Capital Press

EUGENE, Ore. — Sawing through lamb carcasses isn't how most people typically spend their Monday nights, but three students recently did just that as part of a class on butchering livestock.

The class was sponsored by the Eugene Meat Collective, whose stated mission is to bring local meat to the public, impact the way people think about their food and build new connections within the community.

The most recent class focused on lamb butchery and was taught by Cody Wood, owner of Willamette Valley Lamb, who contributed his animals to the class. Wood reached out to the local collective's founder, Jonathan Tepperman, to teach after reading about it.

“I thought it was cool what he was doing. I love it when people come out to my farm and I show them how to butcher,” Wood said. “It's fun to see people connect with food.”

He said butchering is a skill most people don't have and the classes make for a better-educated consumer. Along with learning the technical skills, the collective also provides recipes to help students learn that there's a lot they can do with the meat.



Aliya Hall/For the Capital Press

Butchery teacher Cody Wood starts to break down a lamb as student Mike Giroux and intern Elijah Iles watch. The Eugene Meat Collective offers a variety of meat processing classes.

“I think Jonathan's class is brilliant,” Wood said. “People would start out with sausage-making, which is pretty disconnected from a whole lamb carcass, which feels pretty real. I think that's a brilliant system.”

Tepperman said there's a squeamishness around meat that doesn't have to exist.

“I want to do a chicken class because people think if you touch a raw chicken you'll die within 30 seconds if you don't wash your hands. Yes, you're not going to want to lick your fingers after, but you can touch it and you can cook with it; as long as you follow the right procedures it's

very safe, and there's nothing wrong with touching it.”

One of the students, Steve Davey, said he heard about the collective from the local newspaper and he was glad that he took this class.

“I learned to break an animal down and the different cuts of the meat,” he said. “It's a different appreciation to know what I'm looking for. It's hard work and tricky to not injure yourself.”

Davey, who works in the roofing industry and is more familiar with fish and preparing sushi, said he will continue to hone his butchery skills until he gains proficiency.

The Eugene Meat Collec-

tive was formed by Tepperman in February 2016, and launched through a nonprofit called the Meat Collective Alliance, which has helped communities across the U.S. start collectives. Camas Davis founded the nonprofit as well as the country's first meat collective in Portland, Ore.

The collectives have extended beyond Oregon. Washington has collectives in Olympia and Seattle, and California has collectives in El Dorado County, San Diego and Southern California. Florida also opened a collective in Gainesville.

“I felt there was a need; I felt there was a general interest in connecting with meat differently,” Tepperman said. “And also for my own selfish reasons, I wanted to learn and deepen my own skills.”

Tepperman, a former vegetarian, wanted to find what he believes is a more sustainable way to eat animals. On his website biography, he said he should be able to hunt, kill, process and cook the meat himself.

The classes include sausage-making and lamb, deer and pig butchering. The students take home a portion of the meat they helped butcher.

Although he said that he's still on a learning curve, Tepperman wasn't surprised by the level of interest in the

classes because “people from all socio-economic levels and parts of society are interested in eating more sustainable.”

He said students from all walks of life, such as farmers, students, hobbyists, chefs and “back-to-earthers,” have taken the classes.

“A lot of what we're trying to do is connect farmers with people who would want to buy their animals. My goal is to help the farmers out and the consumers, so they can see a transparent version of what is happening,” Tepperman said. “The third part is working with the butchers in town. To get someone who's doing it and highlight what they're doing. I want to showcase what goes into local meat and why there's value in that.”

Tepperman said he wants the Eugene Meat Collective to develop an interconnected culture and community to create more demand for local meat from local farmers and butchers.

“I'm hoping (the collective) is a bridge bringing in urban people who are disconnected. Surprisingly, a lot of rural people are becoming disconnected from their food as well. Often I get, ‘My father can slaughter or butcher an animal, but I don't know how to do it,’ so even in rural areas those skills are being lost,” he said. “I feel like I'm here on a mission.”

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Through Saturday Oct. 28

90th National FFA Convention and Expo. Bankers Life Fieldhouse, Lucas Oil Stadium, Indianapolis, Ind. Website: <https://www.ffa.org/>

Washington State Sheep Producers Annual meeting and

convention. Hilltop Inn, 928 NW Olsen St., Pullman, Wash. Among the many events on the agenda are presentations by the Washington State University Department of Animal Sciences, the University of Idaho Department of Animal and Veterinary Sciences and by Dr. Brian Joseph, Washington State Veterinarian. Website: www.wssp.org

Wednesday, Nov. 1

Sustainable Community Stewards Volunteer Training. 6-9:15 p.m. McCollum Park, 600 128th St. SE, Everett, Wash. Cost: \$30 Website: <http://bit.ly/2hijXC4>

Wednesday-Friday Nov. 1-3

Weed Conference. Wenatchee Convention Center, 121 N Wenatchee Ave., Wenatchee, Wash. The conference will feature more than 40 topics and speakers, trade shows, state license and certified crop adviser credits. Website: info@weedconference.org

Thursday, Nov. 2

Four-Part Farm and Ranch Succession Workshop 6-8:30 p.m. Online or Clackamas Community College Harmony Campus, 7738 SE Harmon Road, Milwaukie, Ore. Learn from an attorney, an account-

ant, an appraiser, a banker, the director of Oregon State University's Austin Family Business Program and farmers who've been through the process. Receive free one-on-one succession counseling sessions between each event. Part one of four parts. Cost: Free. Website: <http://bit.ly/2elYcPx>

Monday-Tuesday Nov. 6-7

Washington Dairy Conference & Trade Show. Yakima Convention Center, 10 N. Eighth St., Yakima, Wash. Annual meeting activities, plus time to catch up with fellow producers, sponsors and exhibitors. The

Dairy Women will host their scholarship auction. Both the Dairy Federation and the Dairy Women will hold annual membership meetings. The Dairy Farmers of Washington will hold their board meeting. Website: <http://wastatedairy.com/>

Wednesday, Nov. 8

Sustainable Community Stewards Volunteer Training. 6-9:15 p.m. McCollum Park, 600 128th St. SE, Everett, Wash. Cost: \$30 Website: <http://extension.wsu.edu/snohomish/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2012/11/2017-SCS-Application-form.doc>

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