

Idaho Innovators

Helping Western landscapes go native

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

TWIN FALLS, Idaho — A small company is making big strides as a supplier of ornamental plant species native to the Great Basin.

Now in its fourth year of sales, Native Roots will supply wholesale nurseries in the region with 30,000 plant plugs and about 10,000 seeds.

The company markets 46 species of ornamental native plants and has more than 500 species in development.

The business started with baby steps and the tenacity of a University of Idaho researcher. Steve Love, a long-time potato breeder, got the opportunity to shift gears to horticulture and native plants — his first loves — in 2005 when the university wanted to strengthen its horticulture extension work. The university created the position of statewide consumer horticulture specialist and tapped Love for the job.

Easy decision

“It was not a hard decision to make the move,” Love said, adding that he also enjoyed his work in potatoes.

When he made that switch, which mostly involved teaching and training, he also wanted to develop a unique research



Steve Love, a University of Idaho horticulture specialist, with shrubby penstemon.

project. Idaho was in the middle of its last significant drought cycle, and with a static water supply and growing demand it was clear landscapers were going to have to learn to get by with a little less water, he said.

He and then UI turf grass researcher Tom Salaiz started teaching water-saving principles for home landscapes. But they needed the

plant materials to back up the principles, he said.

That put Love on the path of trying to “create a whole pallet of plants people can landscape with and save water.”

His first efforts to collect native plants were during a camping trip to the Pioneer Mountains in 2005. Since then he’s collected about half of the materials. The other half has come from other collectors.

Domesticating those species, which are highly variable, to produce a consistent and viable commercial product is a long-term endeavor. It takes years of breeding, selection and cultivation. Once he had several species stabilized, the Native Roots people stepped up to develop a market for the plants, he said.

“It’s been a really exciting deal. I have a lot of personal investment in the plants,” he said.

Six years ago, Native Roots started bringing Love’s plants

into their operation to begin seed production.

“We’re trying to create a whole new line from wildflowers. It’s been a fascinating process,” Love said.

Native species now flourish on 130 Native Roots plots, where plants are grown and harvested for seed. The seed is cleaned and either sold or planted to produce plugs. Both are sold to wholesale nurseries, said Andy West, Native Roots lead grower and production manager.

The native species can replace ornamentals in landscapes to save water and increase pollinators. Because they are perennial, there’s no need to replant every year, he said.

‘Giving back’

“Essentially, it’s giving back to the environment, putting back what’s already there, creating a natural ecosystem with

native plants,” he said.

Native Roots started marketing 31 species in 2014 and adds five species to the offerings every year to avoid saturating the market.

“Most nurseries only have a small section dedicated to native plants. We’re trying to educate the public on options available to them,” he said.

Lack of education is the only thing keeping the business from booming, he said.

In addition to its Native Roots branded line for use in ornamental landscapes, the company also produces other genetically diverse plants and seeds that were not developed by Love. They go to restoration projects.

In that business, the company sells as much as 1-1/2 tons of seed, including a native turf grass mix, and up to 250,000 restoration-grade plants a year.

This story was first published on June 17, 2017.

Idaho’s agriculture director sets the pace

Celia Gould a trail blazer in Idaho ag

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — When you’re director of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture and still own and operate a ranch, there’s not a lot of down time.

ISDA Director Celia Gould, who is in her 10th year, makes the two-hour drive from Boise to Buhl after work each Friday to help run her ranch on the weekend.

Then it’s back to Boise to run the department.

“I’ve never been a person that needed a lot of down time,” she said.

Gould is the first woman to hold the job and will be

longest-serving director at the end of her current four-year term.

Gould, who also served 16 years in the Idaho Legislature, said she took the job because it gave her an opportunity to help an industry she grew up in and loves.

“Agriculture has always been my passion. It’s why I ran for the legislature,” she said. “I wanted to do what I loved and that was agriculture.”

When she was offered the position by Gov. Butch Otter, himself a rancher, she never imagined she would remain for three terms.

“My plan was to be here four years and then go back to the ranch full time,” Gould said. “I never envisioned I would stay here that long.”



Celia Gould, director of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, is the first woman to hold that job.

But as she told legislators two years ago, before they voted to approve her for a third term, she felt she has unfinished business at the department.

During her second year as ISDA director in 2008, during the recession, the department’s budget was slashed 13 percent and that meant a lot of cutting.

“We cut some things in 2008 that we probably shouldn’t have cut, but we just didn’t have a choice and now we’ve had to go back and do some fence building,” Gould said.

With the ISDA budget almost back to its pre-2008 level — the department’s 2018 fiscal year budget is \$45.5 million while the 2007 budget was \$46 million — Gould says she would like to do some positive things.

Gould said that since funding has returned to near normal, the ISDA has stepped up its marketing programs and significantly improved its laboratory capabilities.

Some of her goals include seeking more opportunities for the state’s organic growers, continuing to grow

ISDA’s range monitoring program and continuing to grow exports, which have almost doubled under her tenure.

She and her husband, former Idaho Speaker of the House Bruce Newcomb, raise Angus and Wagyu cattle on their ranch.

Otter told Capital Press in a statement that Gould’s “years of experience both in the field and here under the dome of the Capitol made her an ideal pick to lead the department of agriculture, a job she has done with remarkable skill.”

“Her considerable knowledge about Idaho agriculture and wealth of experience in the legislature provide her with invaluable insight, which is why I routinely seek her guidance on many issues,” he said.

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