



Gail Oberst/For the Capital Press

Tom Fessler and his four siblings have expanded their great-grandfather's 50 acres to a 2,000-acre farm that includes Woodburn Nursery and Azaleas.

Nursery makes every drop count

By **GAIL OBERST**
For the Capital Press

WOODBURN, Ore. — Tom Fessler of Woodburn Nursery and Azaleas wasn't raised on the wrong side of the tracks. In fact, the tracks run right through his family's property — 2,000 acres of nursery, grass seed and row crops.

But, Fessler noted, he and his four siblings were raised on the wrong side of the river. Had his great-grandparents settled just a few hundred yards closer to the Pudding River, the family's focus on conserving water might not have been so intense. The Fesslers grew up with inventions that save water and money on one of Oregon's largest nursery operations.

The nursery that was established in 1968 by Tom's parents, Bob and Jean, sells wholesale nationwide and in Canada. Woodburn Nursery stock can be found at garden centers, Safeway and Costco, to name a few.

Most of the water used in the nursery operation is pulled from wells on the

property, and from tributaries of Zollner Creek, which flows into the Pudding River. Because water is in short supply, waste is not an option in his greenhouses and fields, Fessler said. Since 1986, five years before the state passed rules to encourage water reuse, Woodburn Nursery began installing French drain systems that rerouted used water on the greenhouse floors into collection pipes and then to filtration systems.

"Everywhere we water, we collect it and reuse it," Fessler said.

Today, with many more water-saving measures added to its tool belt, Woodburn Nursery's operation is recycling 60 to 70 percent of the water it uses.

Is it saving the farm lots of money?

Fessler shrugs, and puns: "It's probably a wash." The recycling equipment and the costs for treatment eat up any savings on potential water purchases, if additional water were available, which it is not. Reuse is essential.

More importantly, water reuse and conservation has allowed the company to grow without additional water.

For example, Woodburn Nursery's

pot-in-pot tree and shrub cultivation, which has expanded since the year 2000 to about 250 acres, utilizes a "drip" system that delivers to each plant a precise amount of water and nutrients, eliminating overwatering. The system also reduces the muddy mess and extra work of ball and burlap harvests. Fessler said the business has maintained 200 employees for the past 15 years while doubling sales — another form of conservation.

Automation has aided the company's ability to measure and reuse water, but human managers are still the nursery's most important assets, Fessler said. Their eyes are on the product daily. Computerization came early to the farm, in 1988, and today is taking over a portion of the overhead sprinkling system, which responds to heat and sunlight. The newest sunlight-driven system in the greenhouse is replacing timed automatic sprinkling that is less efficient.

Fessler said his father's innovations and attention to quality has inspired his children — all of whom are partners in the farm — to act likewise.

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