

NW Transplants stakes out niche in valley

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

MOLALLA, Ore. — In the late 1980s Neal Lucht saw the need to produce transplants for commercial agriculture. At the time, plug transplants weren't grown in the Pacific Northwest, but he knew such an operation would open many crop opportunities in the region.

He and his wife, Pamela, started the company in 1990. Today the business encompasses 20 acres with 200,000 square feet of greenhouse space. They now produce 80 million to 90 million transplants of more than 300 species each year. This puts them on the front line of many newer crops.

Their newest crop is hemp. Only this year the state legislature rewrote the law regarding industrial hemp production to allow a transplant producer into the seed custody chain. This year NWT is growing 3 million hemp plants.

"You have to learn to grow everything, and still have all the risks of farmers in the field," Neal said. "We can provide some protection, but I can't just modify the climate to be perfect for that plant; it's got to be grown and hardened



Brenna Wiegand/For the Capital Press

Neal, Pamela and Lauren Lucht of Northwest Transplants in Molalla, Ore., in a greenhouse filled with young vegetable plants. Farmers can mitigate their risk by planting plugs instead of sowing seeds.

in a structural way to go out in Mother Nature's field."

In the beginning most in agriculture couldn't see the feasibility of Neal's early vision.

"When we started our efforts to get into this we brought all the extension and university people together to help figure it out, and every one of them said it couldn't be done here," Neal said. "They're right if there weren't new technologies to throw those economic factors out. We had to show them the economics of what our industry could do and design a system to grow quality plant material

backwards to meet those economics."

Pamela and Neal's daughter, Lauren, said growers use NWT's services to mitigate risk, which is especially valuable for new varieties.

"The genetics are too expensive to just throw seed out on the ground," Lauren said.

"My parents are unique. They are so willing to take a risk on new technology, but they both had a vision to really change what agriculture could look like in the Willamette Valley and saw that through," she added. "Though it hasn't been easy, the various things that we get to touch and shape

because of our unique position in the industry is really cool."

But it takes people to make the company go.

"Ag needs to stop whining and fighting over minimum wage; we're paying so much higher than minimum wage right now that it's funny," Neal said. "We're so short of people in our industry it's insane — our labor crews right now are homeless men and single moms; we have very few Hispanics and none of them come and ask for work."

"Our challenge is not only finding people who want to show up for work, for them to be any kind of skilled labor



Northwest Transplants

Northwest Transplants has 20 acres and 200,000 square feet of greenhouse space. The Molalla, Ore., nursery produces upwards of 90 million transplants a year for commercial farms.

is nearly impossible," Lauren said. "We've hired a few younger kids and they just don't have the drive to push through parts of the job that aren't so fun and stick around for the good parts."

Pamela said finding the best way to work with a new generation of employees requires a different mindset.

"The responsibility lies with us to determine how to work with a millennial to have a win-win for both of us," she said. "We have to be open-minded to change or adapt to new ways of getting the same old job done."

"My millennial mindset is about working smarter, not harder," Lauren said. "My biggest push has been automating payroll; we are currently trialing an electronic face recognition time clock system; eventually we could outsource

payroll and not have to do it in office."

"I'm not afraid to admit that farming's a seven-day-a-week job but I would like to have my free time and be able to play and enjoy my life," Lauren said. "I only have one life to live and I am working on tools that will allow me to manage remotely."

Lauren said her participation in the REAL Oregon (Resource Education & Agriculture Leadership) program has helped equip her for the job at hand.

"The skills involved can be hard and intimidating, and REAL Oregon provides a supportive environment of your peers where you can learn how to appreciate and highlight and teach people about our industry and our natural resources in Oregon," she said.

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