

## People & Places

# Grower succeeds despite counselor's advice

Kathy LeCompte bursts through gender gap in agriculture

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

As a university horticulture student, Kathy LeCompte once got some bad advice from a guidance counselor about her plan to commercially grow and sell plants.

"I was told early in my career there was no room for women in the nursery industry," she said.

After successfully running the Brooks Tree Farm for the better part of four decades with her husband, Dave, LeCompte likes to think she and other women have helped change the negative gender stereotype espoused by her counselor.

"It turns out he was wrong," LeCompte said.

Since starting on a 30-acre parcel in 1980, the company has grown to seven sites with 255 acres and annually sells up to 6 million plants of roughly 50 varieties.

The nursery produces conifer seedlings for multiple markets — reforestation, Christmas trees and ornamental stock — as well as native plants for habitat restoration projects.

Much of the company's plants are field-grown, but it's also invested in greenhouses in which they're grown in "plugs," or tiny containers that contain the roots, rendering them less vulnerable to drying out.

"They tend to be a lot more uniform," LeCompte said.

Selling plants with more than one purpose has traditionally broadened the company's base of customers, helping to insulate it from shocks to any one market.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Kathy LeCompte, co-owner of Brooks Tree Farm, examines one of the conifer plugs growing in a greenhouse at her company's original location in Brooks, Ore.

"It helps even out production," LeCompte said.

Brooks Tree Farm was usually far enough back in the supply chain to cushion it from economic disruptions, but the most recent "Great Recession" proved an exception to that rule.

With the severe downturn in housing, loggers weren't cutting trees for new homes and didn't need seedlings for replanting. At the same time, housing developers and homeowners stopped investing in landscaping, drying up demand for plants.

"It hit our nursery on both sides. We weren't supplying the timber or the ornamental nursery trade," LeCompte said.

To make matters worse, severe overproduction in the Christmas tree industry destroyed demand for seedlings in that sector as well.

Between 2008 and 2015, the company dumped 3 mil-

lion Noble fir seedlings, for example, because they were getting too big to effectively harvest and ship.

"It's not like other businesses where you can leave product on a shelf until things are better," she said.

Fortunately, the fourth pillar of the company's business, native plant sales, was a major factor in why the nursery survived. Environmental restoration projects are often funded by the federal government, which spent heavily to stimulate the economy during the recession.

The native plant market is inherently risky because there are relatively few buyers who can order tremendous numbers of plants.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, native species are often finicky to germinate and cultivate even though they're grown in their natural climate.

"They just take a lot of baby-sitting," LeCompte said.

Seeds from the cottonwood and willow spoil quickly, for example, and the seedlings that do emerge can grow very unevenly. Meanwhile, their irrigation needs are disparate: Willows desperately need water, whereas over watering cottonwoods would quickly produce enormous, unsaleable trees.

Though native plants pose particular challenges, anticipating demand years or even decades out is a conundrum facing each of the market segments served by Brooks Tree Farm.

Knowing how many Christmas trees consumers will want, for instance, is highly speculative, LeCompte said. "We're guessing what the market is going to need 12 to 15 years out. That's tough."

Now that the glut of Christmas trees has ended and housing starts have improved, there's enough need for seedlings that a shortage has developed.



**Western  
Innovator**

**Kathy LeCompte**

**Owner:** Brooks Tree Farm with husband, Dave LeCompte

**Headquarters:** Brooks, Ore.

**Employees:** 30 year-round, up to 75 during peak harvest season.

**Founded:** 1980

**Property:** Seven locations totaling 255 acres.

**Markets served:** Christmas trees, reforestation, ornamental nursery stock, native habitat restoration.

**Sales territory:** Primarily the Pacific Northwest, but also throughout the U.S. and occasionally international.

"Those trees were pushed out and now there's an under supply," LeCompte said.

One product that's not as exposed to long-term trends in other industries are tiny coniferous trees that are used as gifts at weddings and funerals.

The traditional use for these trees was as "grafters" that serve as the base for other varieties, but Brooks Tree Farm also sells them in decorative boxes or champagne flutes, serving as inexpensive and flexible party favors.

Such diversification is helpful in an industry filled with uncertainties about future demand.

"Those are questions none of us knows the answers to," LeCompte said.

# DEQ honors Clif Bar for pollution prevention

Capital Press

Clif Bar has been recognized as a Pollution Prevention Champion by the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality for its successful efforts to reduce waste and improve sustainability at its Twin Falls manufacturing facility.

"Clif Bar is setting a gold standard for not only internal waste reduction, but for employee and community engagement on environmental sustainability," Ben Jarvis, DEQ's pollution prevention coordinator, said in a press release.

Pollution prevention is any technique used to reduce or eliminate pollution generated,



Clif Bar & Co.

Clif Bar & Co.'s bakery in Twin Falls. The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality says Clif Bar is at the forefront of innovation.

seeking to eliminate or minimize the amount of toxicity of wastes and pollutants before they are generated, according to DEQ.

To qualify as a candidate

for pollution prevention recognition, Clif Bar submitted an application to DEQ demonstrating how it incorporated pollution prevention into daily operations by re-

ducing raw materials or toxic materials purchased; hazardous or solid waste generated; water, energy, or fuel used; or air pollutants emitted.

"This award is a small token of appreciation for the unwavering dedication that Clif Bar has shown for protecting the environment," Jarvis said.

"We have learned so much about their employee and community engagement efforts, and it truly appears that Clif Bar has left no stone unturned. From building envelope efficiency to supply chain management to renewable energy sourcing, Clif Bar is at the forefront of innovation," he said.

Among its achievements,

Clif Bar has a substantially more efficient building and bakery due to the use of hybrid cooling towers that reduce water use by over 30 percent, LED light fixtures and a reflective roof that reduce energy use by 20 percent, and process equipment that result in emission reductions of over 40 percent.

The facility is also on track to achieve a zero-waste certification, which it anticipates completing by the year 2020.

Efforts currently underway to achieve zero-waste certification include heavy investment in recycling of wood, cardboard and plastic and supplying more 2,000 tons of feed to local dairy farmers.

## Calendar

### Wednesday, Oct. 3

Third Annual Open Farm. 8:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. UC Kearney Agricultural Research and Extension Center, 9240 S. Riverbend Ave., Parlier, Calif. Open Farm is a gathering hosted each year by the farming community to connect technology vendors, academics and growers to accelerate the digital transformation of the food and agriculture sector. Registration is free for growers and government employees, \$20 for representatives of power and water utilities and \$40 for vendors. Website: <https://bit.ly/2N4zRBI>

### Wednesday-Thursday Oct. 3-4

Oregon Water Resources Congress Golf Tournament and Technical Seminar. Eagle Crest Resort, 1522 Cline Falls Road, Redmond, Ore. The technical seminar will be Oct. 4 and provide district staff, board members and consultants will innovative strategies, tools and solutions to meet water management challenges. The golf tournament is Oct. 3. Website: [www.owrc.org](http://www.owrc.org)

### Saturday, Oct. 6

Oregon's Bounty, 100 a.m.-2 p.m. Oregon State Capitol, 910 Court St. NE, Salem, Ore. This event focuses on the importance of agriculture in the state and brings a little bit of the farm to the front steps of the Capitol. Website: <https://bit.ly/2QmtO9m>

### Friday-Sunday Oct. 12-14

Hood River Valley Harvest Fest. 1-6 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Hood River Event Site, North of Exit 63 off

Interstate 84, Hood River, Ore. Celebrate Hood River's harvest season. This old-fashioned fall festival brings together more than 120 vendors offering local produce and food products, plus arts and crafts, wine, cider and beer tastings. Held along the scenic Hood River waterfront, this is the Columbia River Gorge's biggest celebration of the region's incredible fall bounty. Website: <http://hoodriver.org/harvest-fest/>

### Thursday, Oct. 18

Balancing Profitability and Access in Local Food Systems. 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. The Riverside Hotel, 2900 W. Chinden Blvd., Boise, Idaho. In a state that comprises big ag, small ag and highly motivated food system stakeholders, how can we bring more locally produced foods into mainstream markets and strengthen the economics of small- to mid-sized farms? This one-day conference will explore, through an economic lens, ways to cultivate a local food economy to create jobs, invigorate small farms and businesses and keep precious dollars in our Idaho communities. Hosted by the University of Idaho Extension, the conference is made possible with a Western Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (WSARE) grant. Cost: \$45 Website: <https://idahofood2018.eventbrite.com>

### Saturday, Oct. 20

Preparing for Winter on Horse Properties Workshop. 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District, 7175 NE Evergreen Parkway No. 400, Hillsboro, Ore. Join the Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District and Horses for Clean Water

for a free workshop about managing mud, manure and pastures along with winter health care for horses. Website: <https://www.swcd.net/event/preparing-winter-horse-properties/>

### Tuesday-Wednesday Oct. 23-24

Nutrient Management Conference. 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Embassy Suites, 1441 Canyon Del Rey, Seaside, Calif. The agenda will focus on the latest FREP-funded research results and practical applications of fertilizing materials for agricultural production in the state of California. Grower, CCA, and PCA credits will be requested. Website: <https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/ls/fldrs/frep/FREPCONference.html>

### Wednesday-Saturday Oct. 24-27

91st National FFA Convention and Expo. Indianapolis, Ind. This is the culmination of the year's work for FFA members from around the nation. Website: <https://convention.ffa.org/schedule/>

### Monday-Wednesday Nov. 5-7

2018 Advances in Walnut Production Short Course. Activities and Recreation Center Ballroom, University of California-Davis. This course is designed for new and experienced growers as well as other industry members interested in commercial walnut production. Website: <http://ucanr.edu/sites/walnutshortcourse/>

### Tuesday, Nov. 6

Water Rights Boot Camp. 10

a.m.-3:30 p.m. Keizer Community Center, 930 Chemawa Road NE, Keizer, Ore. This seminar will address water rights, title issues, transfers and other related issues. Sponsored by the Marion Soil and Water Conservation District. Cost: \$25 Website: <https://www.marion-swcd.net/>

### Wednesday-Friday Nov. 7-9

Weed Conference. Wenatchee Convention Center, 121 N. Wenatchee Ave., Wenatchee, Wash. The 68th conference provides information on all aspects of weed control and management. It covers crops of all kinds, turf and ornamental, vegetation management and aquatic. Website: [www.weedconference.org/Friday-Sunday](http://www.weedconference.org/Friday-Sunday)

### Friday-Sunday Nov. 9-11

Tilth Conference. Davenport Grand Hotel, 333 Spokane Falls Blvd., Spokane, Wash. Tilth Conference brings together hundreds of farmers, producers, researchers and food system professionals for a weekend of learning, building relationships and sharing best practices for growing a healthy food system. The speakers will include Mai Nguyen, who grows heirloom, ethnic grains in Sonoma, Calif., and is the California Organizer for the National Young Farmers Coalition, and Audra Mulkern, the founder of "The Female Farmer Project," a documentary project chronicling the rise of women working in agriculture. Website: [www.tilthalliance.org](http://www.tilthalliance.org)

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### Index

Dairy ..... 8

Livestock ..... 8

Markets ..... 12

Opinion ..... 6

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