

Garden Thyme Nursery: Growing and learning at the same time

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press



Brenna Wiegand/For the Capital Press

Patti Harris sizes up the display gardens at Garden Thyme Nursery in Silverton, Ore. The retail operation grows over 300 varieties of vegetables, herbs and low-maintenance, vigorous and long-blooming perennials with an emphasis on drought-tolerant and deer-resistant plants.

how much responsibility there was and what sells and what doesn't and what's easy to propagate and what isn't, so it was still a pretty steep learning curve."

The nursery now grows over 300 varieties of vegetables, herbs and low-maintenance, vigorous and long-blooming perennials with an emphasis on drought-tolerant and deer-resistant plants.

COVID-19, September's wildfires, the ice storm in February and a record-breaking heat wave the end of June have each ushered in new challenges.

Despite the upheaval connected with COVID, 2020 was a great vegetable season, Harris said.

"I had produced almost

enough vegetable plants for a normal season — somewhere between 16,000 and 20,000 starts — before we found out the pandemic was going to close things down," she said. "Sales were up so much that the stores couldn't keep up and we were able to sell through our veg stock."

Then there was the heatwave.

The day it hit 116 degrees a large shipment was on the last leg of its trip from Minnesota when the truck got stuck in Salem less than half an hour away. The plants suffered substantially, but Harris remains hopeful as she watches over the young plants. She said the incident provided her the opportunity to observe which plants held up best.

SILVERTON, Ore. — Patti Harris got into the greenhouse business while looking for a way to get out of the house.

She had to quit her banking job after an illness affected her eyesight. To combat cabin fever, her husband, George, began shuttling Patti to nursery-related classes at Chemeketa Community College in Salem.

"I loved it and I got so excited; prior to that I hadn't been able to grow anything," Patti said. "Any sane person would have gone to work for a nursery to figure out what the reality was, but I jumped in with both feet."

In 2000, the Harrises opened Garden Thyme Nursery on 6½ acres in Silverton just up the road from the Oregon Garden, which had just broken ground.

"Pretty soon it hit home that the reason everything grew so well was because (Chemeketa) had a greenhouse, a watering system that could deliver fertilizer and a staff taking care of things when I wasn't there," she said. "It is a different story when suddenly it's 90 degrees out here and if the 4-inch pots don't get watered they die.

"It was a huge shift in

Willamette Gardens: Native plant nursery a business and sanctuary

By **GEOFF PARKS**
For the Capital Press

CORVALLIS, Ore. — Esther Gruber McIvoy's Willamette Gardens is a nursery specializing in native plants.

Her efforts to propagate native trees and shrubs, perennials, grasses, vines, sedges and ferns on her small plot near central Corvallis, Ore., has resulted in a niche nursery business that recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.

She terms the nursery "more of a labor of love" with the only major investment being a small tractor.

She has also spent her life working on rare plants, soil invertebrates and other topics.

"I've always been more of a conservationist than an environmentalist," McIvoy said, who helped work toward getting California's Point Reyes designated a national seashore, which now "offers visitors over 1,500 species of plants and animals to discover."

Her plants are grown in raised beds and planters, or she does cuttings, McIvoy said. She currently sells the plants "on a retail basis at a wholesale price," saying it's the only way to keep a steady business without having to match the prices of larger wholesalers.

She used to mix all of her potting soils

on her own in a wheelbarrow until a friend urged her to avoid "wrecking her shoulders" by getting the tractor. Now, it's used by her son to mix the soils and do the tilling for her garden.

"I don't buy pre-made potting soils because I don't use any pesticides or herbicides," she said. She purchases PRC — "publicly recycled compost" — from the city's residential recycling pickup service. It contains garden and woody debris that she mixes with bark and pumice to make the compost she uses for her plants.

"Each plant has its own specifications and qualifications for starting them," she said. "Some are really easy — from cuttings — and some take more work. Some I get bare-root if I don't have them. And natives need to be put in the right part of a habitat."

Willamette Gardens also produces plants for the Benton County Soil and Water Conservation Service on a year-ahead basis, she said.

Those who purchase plants from her are specific about what they want, she said, including color preferences, evergreen or deciduous trees, watering needs and sun exposure.

But the gardens are a sanctuary for McIvoy, who does the work to make it possible.

"I love coming out here; it's my escape," she said.



Geoff Parks/For the Capital Press

Esther Gruber McIvoy tends part of her Willamette Gardens native plants nursery.



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