

ALPHA NURSERY

Building a legacy: 'It's very much a family operation'

By **MOLLY CRUSE**
Capital Press

SALEM, Ore. — Doug Zielinski has spent his entire life on the same lush 150 acres in Salem, Ore. Doug is a fourth-generation farmer but shortly after taking over his family's farm in 1978, he decided to pursue his dream of owning a nursery.

"I wanted to be diversified," he said. "I went to Oregon State and decided that the nursery thing was interesting and exciting."

But for Doug, owning a nursery was far more than just an exciting new venture. "Really I wanted to have good, full-time employees. And I couldn't do that on the farm side. The crops we're raising were just seasonal. So this way we could bring on good, full-time people. And so it just evolved from there."

And the people are at the heart of Alpha Nursery.

Many of the employees at Alpha Nursery have been at business for



Molly Cruse/Capital Press

From left to right are Doug Zielinski, Josh Zielinski, RJ Tancredi and Sal Vega of Alpha Nursery.

over a decade. Sal Vega, one of the growers, has been at the nursery for 16 years, while RJ Tancredi, the general manager, has been working at the nursery for 43 years. "He's been with me from the start," said Doug, speaking of RJ. "It's very much a family operation."

For Doug, family is the future of the nursery. Josh Zielinski, Doug's son, is the next generation of Alpha

Nursery. Like Doug, Josh grew up on the property but initially had plans to move away from the nursery and the business all together.

"Growing up, our parents were working a lot more than our friends' parents," said Josh. "So I thought, 'Well, maybe there's something else I should do.' But they're successful and they're happy. So just seeing that coupled with the fact that this is

a pretty rewarding way to earn a living. It's unlike anything else. We're making stuff out of nothing here."

Josh left the nursery to attend Pepperdine University in California, where he studied business and Spanish. But after a few years of working in California, he felt like something was missing and he returned home to work at the nursery alongside his dad.

"I actually kind of resonate with our product," he said. "I used to work for a (clothing company) in California, and I just felt like we're making T-shirts, this stuff doesn't matter at all. It doesn't do anything for anyone other than cover your back. But plants make the world a better place, simply put."

Today, Alpha Nursery produces a variety of plants, ranging from Japanese maples to landscape shrubs.

"At first we started growing what I would call just like landscape staples for the Northwest. And has evolved to cover kind of your gen-

eral North American landscape palette," said Josh.

As far as their plans for the future, both Doug and Josh agree that they want to keep up with the growing trends in the nursery industry and hopefully keep the nursery within the family.

"Josh has children, he has a daughter, and she might be the one in charge of something," said Doug. "She's not afraid to jump right out there, tell me to get the weeds over there and then pick them and bring them to grandma. So there's generational Zielinskis, it's a way off, but we do have that to maybe look forward to. And I'll tell them the same thing I told (Josh), it's here if you want it but you have to want to do it."

For Josh, one of the most exciting things has been seeing how the industry has shifted over the last few years. "(Gardening) brings a lot of joy to people's lives," he said. "The pandemic basically created a whole new generation of gardeners."

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