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7. A sustainable dream: Sara Kral builds a native plant nursery that reflects her values. Kipp, C. Digger 56(6):17-19. 2012.

A sustainable dream

Sara Kral builds a native plant nursery that reflects her values

Scholls Valley Native Nursery owner Sara Kral worked with Clean Water Services, a local stormwater and wastewater utility, to restore a stretch of Roderick Creek running through the nursery.

Scholls Valley Native Nursery LLC

Founded: 2003

Products and services: Wholesale grower of bare-root and containerized native plants and trees from local seed sources. Salmon-Safe certified.

Mailing address: PO Box 231088, Tigard, OR 97223.

Location: 4036 N.W. Half Mile Lane, Forest Grove, Ore. (near Gales Creek)

Phone: 503-624-1766

Owner: Sara Kral

Web: www.schollsvally.com

By Curt Kipp

There's a saying about "killing two birds with one stone." But at Scholls Valley Native Nursery LLC, owner Sara Kral likes to "save two fish with one tree," figuratively speaking.

The nursery helps fish and other wildlife by following sustainable practices. When the finished plants are shipped to habitat restoration projects, they help the environment a second time.

"I love the idea that the plants we grow will restore the land elsewhere, and as they're growing here, they'll also sustain wildlife here," she said. "It's a full circle."

Last year, Scholls Valley became just the second plant nursery to earn

certification as a Salmon-Safe farm. Scholls Valley followed in the footsteps of Northwoods Nursery, which was the first Salmon-Safe nursery. Scholls Valley upped the ante by becoming the first Salmon-Safe nursery that grows all native material.

"It's an important part of my business plan and business concept," Kral said. "The reason Salmon-Safe is so important is that I really buy into sustainability."

Sustainability is often defined as the adoption of practices that serve the "triple bottom line," which is "people, planet and profits." For Sara, all three are important.

"I strive to live my personal ideals every day, at work and at home," she said.

In addition to serving the planet, one of her main goals is to provide a great workplace. "I want my employees to enjoy their work, to know they are valued and to feel proud about what they do for a living," she said.

In addition to serving people and planet, Sara's business is also profitable. Scholls Valley will ship 1.2 million bare-root plants this year and plans to ship 1.5 million more the next.

"There's a lot of growth happening," Sara said. "I can't do it all. There aren't enough hours in the day."

An entrepreneurial streak

Sara hasn't always been involved with nurseries.

Her childhood was a quintessentially suburban existence. Growing up in Beaverton, her dad was a microchip engineer at Intel; her mom was a registered nurse. She enjoyed camping and working on weekends with her grandparents, who had property on Cooper Mountain. She loved to be outdoors.

Her mom and dad eventually moved out to the country, but only after Sara was in college. While she was studying business, psychology, and mediation, her younger sisters were enjoying the country life, caring for horses and donkeys.

Sara married her college sweetheart, Nathan Burke, who worked for Oregon Dome, Inc., a builder of geodesic homes, and started a family. Nathan received his Master's of Business Administration and Sara completed her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Oregon. She enrolled in the University of Oregon Law School and earned her degree in 1998.

The Burkes lived in Eugene, where Sara worked as a professional mediator for the Lane County Family Mediation Program. It was rewarding to be able to help parents, who often were at a low point in their lives, to come to agreements for the benefit of their children.

But circumstances soon tested her own ability to deal with adversity.

In rapid succession, her young son died of an infarcted bowel, then her husband, Nathan, became ill with a very

aggressive form of colorectal cancer. The family pulled up stakes, moving to the Portland area so that Nathan could receive more advanced treatment. They settled in Scholls, a rural community near Portland.

Forced to leave behind her mediator's post, Sara improvised a new working life, while raising her two young children. She went to work with her father, Bob Hamilton, who in addition to working at Intel, had his own business on the side. As Business Authority Limited, he helped others establish start-up businesses. Sara loved this work, too.

"Like my dad, and Nathan, I'm a very entrepreneurial person," she said.

"I strive to live my personal ideals every day, at work and at home."

— Sara Kral

Scholls Valley Native Nursery LLC

After her husband died in 2001, Sara went to work for Jay Hoffman, a member of her community and the owner of Hoffman Farms and TVP in Scholls, Ore. She was initially brought on to handle sales and ordering, but her responsibilities grew.

"I needed to challenge myself," she said. "Once Jay understood that I could do more than work on the computer, I worked with him in other areas of his business. It was a great job."

While working for Jay, Sara met George Kral, the man she would marry in 2003. George is a forester who established his own native habitat restoration business, Ash Creek Forest Management LLC, in 1997. Ash Creek specializes in land management, mitigation and restoration, including forests, wetlands and riparian areas. Through George, Sara learned there was an increasing need for native plants

to use in these projects. He was experiencing difficulty locating the material, and so were others. "It was obvious to me that there was a better way to provide native plants," she said.

Building a dream

To fill the need for native plants, Sara founded Scholls Valley Native Nursery in September 2003.

At first, Scholls Valley was located on land that Sara leased from Hoffman Farms. However, the business grew, and in 2008, she was able to purchase her current 60-acre site, in the Gales Creek watershed west of Forest Grove.

Surrounded by tall Coast Range foothills, the property is bisected by the meandering course of Roderick Creek, a Gales Creek tributary. Deer frequent the site, and during the colder months, a herd of elk is often present.

The move allowed her to bring all growing in-house. Everything is grown from gathered native seed, with the exception of a few conifer plugs. The genera offered include dogwood, ash, Oregon grape, ninebark, cottonwood, fir, cascara, currant, willow, spirea and snowberry, but these are just a few.

In all, the nursery sells some 125 different native species. "Being able to offer so many plants for different habitats and terrains is great," Sara said.

The bulk of the business is bare-root plants, including some live-stake cuttings. Live stakes are dormant plants with the branches and roots cut off. They are frequently used in restoration projects to stabilize the soil. After they are planted in pilot holes in the ground, they often hold fabrics in place. Eventually they sprout new branches and roots.

Scholls Valley also offers wetland plants and herbaceous plugs. The nursery grows some of its natives in containers, too, for those customers that prefer it.

The company offers its plants to any customer that can meet a \$200 minimum order, but most of its products are sold to the public sector. Major contract customers include the City of Portland, Metro, Clean Water Services and others.

Although Sara was pretty much on her own in the early days, the business has grown. Key employees include field manager Marta Fisher and sales and inventory manager Rachael Roberts.

"Between the three of us, we manage pretty well," Sara said.

In addition, Scholls Valley has a crew of three year-round field workers, bringing on larger crews during particular seasons of the year.

A sustainable commitment

Sara decided to seek Salmon-Safe certification because it made sense for a native plant nursery, but also because it reflects her deeply-held values. "It's just taking care of the land we have right here and now," she said.

She backed her commitment by setting aside 25 acres along Roderick Creek for wetlands restoration. She signed a conservation easement with Clean Water Services and allowed them to do extensive work on the site.

The restoration work impressed Salmon-Safe Executive Director Dan Kent, as did the overall operation at Scholls Valley. "They met all of our requirements right out of the gate," he said. "From a salmon perspective, they are extraordinary stewards."

To earn the certification, Scholls Valley didn't have to change anything it was already doing. The nursery was already using drip irrigation, and was not using any high-risk pesticides considered dangerous to salmon. "It's a very low-input operation," Dan said.

According to Sara, the feeling of helping the environment is unbeatable.

"I would absolutely encourage people to do it," she said. "Leaving this ground in a good, clean, happy condition, sustaining the wildlife, is wonderful." ©

Curt Kipp is the publications manager for the Oregon Association of Nurseries and the managing editor of Digger magazine. Follow him on Twitter at @diggermag or contact him at 503-582-2008 or ckipp@oan.org.



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