

Urban Forest Nursery: High-tech tools

13 August 2020



Jim Barborinas and his wife, Annie, moved from the Midwest to the Northwest, and in the last 26 years they have built a state-of-the-art tree nursery.

Barborinas grew up in Peoria, Ill., and received bachelor's and master's degrees in forestry and resource management from Southern Illinois University.

He did a lot of tree planting, transplanting, and started small tree nurseries for the Forest Park Foundation and Peoria Park District.

"My wife, Annie, and I wanted to move west so after working in the Midwest for 15 years, we moved to Washington state in January 1988," Jim said.

He began working in the Puget Sound region as a consulting arborist, something he's still doing.

"Our consulting work involved tree evaluations, tree protection plans, tree selection and landscape installation, review and monitoring. I gathered a lot of information about what people and cities want and expect in their trees," he said. "Because of my background in tree planting, I always wanted to raise trees. I couldn't always find the quality and variety of trees I wanted, so we decided to explore our other passion for growing the trees."

In 1994 Jim and Annie rented a small field down the road and started a wholesale tree nursery, Urban Forest Nursery, planting 300 trees the first year. The next year they planted 1,000.

"Then we purchased 32 acres of beautiful farmland in the Skagit Valley, near Mount Vernon, for our wholesale tree nursery and consulting office, and now plant 7,000 to 8,000 trees annually. We have about 27,000 trees in the ground, depending on time of year and sales. We focus on high-quality street trees for cities, commercial landscapers, contractors, and brokers," he said.

"One thing that surprised me when I first got into this was how many new varieties are constantly being found, tested and introduced. Some turn out great, and sometimes it takes years before we see what really works. In some cases, older trees have poor branch structures that are difficult to maintain," Jim said.

They grow nearly 200 cultivars, plants that are produced by selective breeding, and 3% to 5% of their trees are straight genus species.

"We still grow the popular, faster-growing cultivars of red maples, red oaks, etc. Those are notoriously tough trees and many cities still use them, but over the years, we've found they are more likely to cause infrastructure damage in the limited urban spaces they're planted in," he said. "This is partly because they grow so fast and start lifting curbs and sidewalks."

It's important to have trees with good structure that are less susceptible to storm damage.

"We grow a lot of new cultivars that we think are better for the limited soil volume and above-ground spaces in urban areas. Some are slow growing in the nursery, taking an additional 1 to 3 years to grow to the same size as the fast-growing trees," he said.

They are picky about root systems, he said. "We want strong, broad roots — not root systems that are kinked, circling, or tangled up."

They grow their trees in High Caliper fabric grow-bags (root-control tree bags). This allows the root system to grow through the bag but still constricts the root, which tends to create larger branching roots within the bag.

This concentrates more of the root system within the bag, reducing the number of roots circling within the bag, he said.

"Using grow-bags also allows us to dig almost any kind of tree throughout the year," he said. "With fabric root bags, we can transplant any time during summer since most of the root system is within the bag, and can transplant difficult-to-transplant trees more easily."

They also put an RFID tag on every tree, using a program from Arbre Technologies in Wisconsin.

"When we plant the tree, we enter its unique number into our Arbre Tech inventory, and can track where it was purchased, and what size it was when we planted it," he said. "We can track the growth of that tree throughout the 3 to 6 years it grows in our field. We can track the whole nursery, a block, half a block, 2 rows, or whatever, and it always updates the correct tree, caliper size and date we updated — a very current inventory system."

Urban Forest Nursery has three full-time employees and additional seasonal workers during planting. Abel Contreras has been the nursery manager for over 20 years, and is responsible for managing day-to-day work associated with planting, irrigating, pruning, digging, and loading. Juan Lopez and Paulino Robles are Abel's right-hand men; they all work hard to ensure the nursery is in tip-top shape.

Source: https://www.capitalpress.com/specialsections/nursery/urban-forest-nursery-high-tech-tools/article_c31b1fa0-c30c-11ea-ae40-4b4e6d677d9f.html