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Orchard Nursery celebrates 75 years of community involvement

By John T. Miller



Current owner Tom Courtright and Kathy Courtright Rondini Photos provided

purchased by Jack Schneider and his partner Stewart Wade in 1946 who established Orchard Nursery on the site.

The nursery was conceived and designed by internationally famed landscape architect Ernest Wertheim, who helped reinvent the nursery business as something more than just a place that sold plants. Wertheim knew that a full-service garden center was the future of the industry, so he created just that.

In 1955, Schneider and Wade were notified by the state of California that the nursery was right in the middle of the proposed construction of Highway 24 and would have to move. After a frantic year of extensions and petitions, the nursery was relocated, but only slightly.

The intersection of Happy Valley Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard was the former entrance to the nursery, but with the construction of the new highway, customers would now enter from the back of the nursery on Acalanes Road. Dirt removed to make way for the freeway forms the mound that borders the entrance

Soon after, the rapid growth of the surrounding communities allowed the store to expand, and the classic Lord & Burnham greenhouse was added for the floral department.

Owner Tom Courtright bought the nursery, which covers 4.5 acres, in 1972. "We're thankful for the community we're in. The Lamorinda area is a great place to have a business," Courtright said, adding about the 75th anniversary celebration, "We celebrated fairly quietly, but had a very nice crowd. It's pretty significant that we've been here so long - and plan to be here another 50 or 75 years." The nursery gave away free tote bags to the first 500 customers. In all, he estimates over 2,000 people visited on the day.

"It's been a fun ride. Even after my 50 years here, I still enjoy coming to work in the morning," said Courtright, who is considering retirement. "My daughter [Vice-President Kathy Courtright Rondini] and the management team has taken over more of the day-to-day operations."

One of the longest tenured employees at Orchard, Chris Martinez, shared that the staff there has a family feel, with the loyalty of the workers matching the warmth and appreciation that owner Courtright shows them.

Courtright said, "We've been very fortunate to have some great employees stick with us for a long time. It's not the highest paying industry, so they must enjoy what they do."

As an attendee at many International Garden Conferences, Courtright has toured over 15 countries and gone to garden centers all over the world, always bringing home fresh ideas to Orchard Nursery. They've done concerts at the `Lazy K' house, evenings in the nursery with wine and hors d'oeuvres, and many other events.

Remarking on the Harvest Festival, Courtright says, "We brought the idea home from the East Coast, where they celebrated the fall season in the nurseries and put it to use here. Where we used to sell firewood out the back of Orchard, I never thought we'd be selling pumpkins." Laughing, he adds, "Now we sell thousands of them!"

A longtime fixture on the western edge of Lafayette, Orchard Nursery recently celebrated its 75th anniversary on March 14.

The celebration was a reminder of the many regular community events hosted by the nursery, including Sunday socials, an annual Christmas show, and a Harvest Festival with live music, barn animals - goats, sheep, bunnies, etc. - children's storytellers, food vendors, crafters, corn stalks, pumpkins and gourds.

The land originally belonged to the Kergan family, who purchased it in 1935. The Kergans built their ranch on the frontage of the only main road from Oakland and Berkeley through Lafayette and on to Walnut Creek - a dirt road cutting through open fields.

The Kergan ranch featured cattle with a `Rocking K' brand, a pear orchard, and fruit stand. The land was

The Courtright's currently reside in Lafayette, but are considering moving to Livermore where Courtright's wife owns and runs a nursery.



The Orchard Nursery fountain was a focal point for many community events. Photos provided

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