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COVER STORY

Farm to floral

By embracing change, Oregon's Cornell Farm is sparking new interests in its customers.

STORY BY JOLENE HANSEN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MERYL SCHENKER



Berkeley Blatter, left with daughter Jazmine, Ed Blatter, Deby Barnhart and Zoe Blatter run Cornell Farm in Portland. The garden center, café and nursery sits on a plot that was once used as a goat dairy.

When Cornell Farms co-owners Ed Blatter and Deby Barnhart opened a roadside stand on Mother's Day in 1987, they knew nothing about the garden center business. But that didn't stop customers from snapping up the fuchsias, geraniums and cherry tomatoes the couple offered that first year.

If ignorance is bliss, it was also a boon to the fledgling business, and Blatter and Barnhart set their own course for success. Today the 5-acre garden center is a haven for shoppers craving top-quality plants, passion-infused garden advice, or simply a respite — with or without an espresso.



Ed Blatter and Deby Barnhart opened a roadside stand on Mother's Day in 1987. PHOTO COURTESY OF ZOE BLATTER

From the ground up

Located in Portland's affluent West Hills neighborhood, Cornell Farm's location seems handpicked. But when Blatter's grandfather, Wilhelm, moved there and built the 1926 farmhouse that now serves as a café, he wasn't looking for nursery land. He chose the site for his goat dairy and named the farm after his alma mater, Cornell University.

By the mid-1950s, Blatter's father, Ted, was raising strawberries on the property. Along the way, he started propagating some plants, mostly for fun. But when he suggested that Blatter and Barnhart open a retail plant business at the farm where Blatter was raised, there was no business to build on. They had nothing — except the land.

"Deby and I started with this plot of land, which is golden, but we had no buildings, so we started with a truck," Blatter says. "Everything we built has always been about what will make what we're doing better. I ask my staff all the time: What will make this the best garden center in the world? We just keep doing it, we just keep trying ... and it's just all sort of worked."

Today, the farm and its landmark farmhouse are a full-service destination garden center in the truest sense, offering what Blatter estimates to be thousands of plant varieties through the season. Zoe and Berkeley, two of Blatter and Barnhart's three children, work alongside their parents. With the recent birth of Berkeley's daughter, Cornell Farm has seen five generations of the family and the changing Portland scene.

"We've just grown into it organically, that's how we've grown the business from the beginning," Zoe says. "We see a possibility, make a few tweaks, then as it grows, we grow with it. That's been part of our success. It's just a slow, gradual, what-the-market-will-bear kind of growth. We've been incredibly lucky that we have this spot and that the city has grown up around us over the years."

Growing with the city

When one of the country's fastest-growing cities supplies your customer and labor base, growing pains affect business, and increased competition in the labor market has hit home. Cornell has 25 year-round employees, and seasonal additions bring the number to 37. Attracting high-quality applicants became increasingly difficult, so the IGC changed its approach.

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In the past few years, Cornell Farm has turned to paid job sites such as Indeed to reach potential employees. "It's been vital, especially for more specialized positions, such as maintenance," Zoe says. Personal interviews narrow the field. "We're not looking for slackers," Barnhart says. "We're looking for people who are on top of their game and want to keep the nursery on top of its game."

Portland's unique land-use planning, which includes urban growth boundaries, has changed the city's landscape and customer needs. "Urban growth has to be within the boundaries, so there's been a lot of infill," Blatter says. While houses have grown bigger, lot sizes stayed the same. Many people are building Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) — second houses on what were single residential lots.

"The areas that people could garden 20 years ago are getting covered up. There's less space for people to do traditional gardening," Blatter says. "More people are renting and moving. They don't invest in plants that stay with the property. They want plants that go with them that they can grow inside."

In response, Cornell Farm caters to using plants in different ways and improving the customer experience, from container gardens and houseplants to services and a café.



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Food, fun and fresh ideas

For years, Cornell Farm customers suggested a cup of coffee would be a great addition to the farm. Those requests were finally fulfilled when the converted farmhouse opened as Cornell Farm Café in 2016. Along with espresso drinks and baked treats, the café serves breakfast, lunch and weekend brunch with an emphasis on fresh, local, seasonal, from-scratch creations.

"It's blown our hopes away," Blatter says. "The neighborhood loves it. It's packed all the time. It works because people love to come and have lunch or brunch in the 100-year-old farmhouse and then stroll around the garden or come in and buy a houseplant or card. It seems to be a perfect symbiotic relationship."

Beyond the café, Cornell Farm has added services to meet increasing demand. Barnhart says that a reputation for inspired container gardens helps fuel the popularity of the IGC's custom potting services. Last season's addition of garden coaching sessions and planting services were immediate hits. "People were really excited we were offering those," Zoe says. "People's eyes light up when they realize they can buy a tree twice the size of what they would otherwise and don't have to do a thing."

Home delivery services aren't new, but delivery requests are increasing along with houseplant sales. Cornell is one of the area's only IGCs to offer large houseplants in large pot sizes, which have been a big hit with customers.

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A new POS system added in 2018 expanded online ordering possibilities. Cornell now offers limited online ordering but hopes to expand their pilot program for online sales and in-store pickup or local delivery.

Embracing change

Cornell Farm once grew the majority of their plants, but increased demand and limited space means growing more selectively. "We still have nine 30-by-100 greenhouses, and we really cram it in, but we tailor what we grow to things we can finish fast," Blatter says.

The standard for evaluating what to grow is how hard it may be to buy it from normal suppliers once it sells out. "We try to cherry-pick what we grow to the things that we anticipate are going to be real popular, either because they have been in the past or we think they're going to be, and we grow successive crops of those through the season," Blatter says.

The IGC's biggest growth category, hands down, is houseplants. "I don't really know how to describe it. Everyone is coming in to get houseplants, lots of houseplants," Blatter says. "That category is still not even close to shrubs and trees or annuals and perennials for us, but the growth is still so significant, we can't discount it." A large remodel of the main greenhouse checkout structure last winter made more room for houseplant sales.

Berkeley says customers prefer the very large or very small. "Four-inch and 2-inch succulents, cactus and miniature foliage sell like crazy — mostly not for terrariums, mostly for small planters," she says. The spotlight is on larger leaves, interesting textures, multi-colored foliage and plants that oxygenate rooms. "People just want that lush, jungle feeling," she says. "It's like plants comfort people, almost like friends."

Sustainability and purposeful gifts, such as candle jars that double as vases once the candle is done, are also in demand. But the biggest surprise Berkeley's seen as the store's gift buyer is puzzles, which have joined cards as the IGC's top-selling gifts.

"When we added the café, there was a big increase in customers not really into gardening, but more into gifts," she says. "Puzzles have really taken off. We can't keep them in stock." It's not unusual for customers — from singles to families and kids to seniors — to stop in, buy a puzzle, and head to the café to play and eat.

Both Berkeley and Zoe attribute much of Cornell Farm's success to embracing change and striving to make the IGC its best. "We're always looking for things that could be better and how to make them better," Zoe says. "It forces you to be constantly critical about what's not working the best it possibly could and make it that much better."

"We stand out because we change with the customer," Berkeley says. "Listen to your customers and help them be successful. Ask what it is they're looking for. Move and change with your customer. Then you can be your best nursery."

The author is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to GIE Media publications.



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