



## We are celebrating 20 Years!

Spring Grove Nursery took root back in 1999, making 2019 our 20<sup>th</sup> year of growing trees! Milestones like this give us an opportunity to stop and pause a bit – reflecting on how we started, how we have grown, and what we envision for our next 20 years.

Just like the trees we grow; our story is rooted in history. We started Spring Grove Nursery in March of 1999. I (Becky) grew up as the 6<sup>th</sup> generation on my family corn & soybean farm in Mazon, Illinois. After graduating from University of Illinois in Landscape Architecture, I began working at a local design/build firm in the south suburbs. Jamie also grew up in Mazon and studied Recreation, Parks, & Tourism at Western Illinois University. After school, he began working at a local park district in the park maintenance division. Shortly after college, we married and began growing our own family. When our daughter Maggie came along, I decided to come back to work at my family farm. At the time, my dad was a leading pioneer in precision farming technology. I quickly found a niche helping manage the technology on the farm and really enjoyed being a part of the great tradition of farming that had been growing for several generations before me.

Jamie and I approached my parents, Doug & Deb Harford, about how we might be able to come into the family farm operation with a venture of our own. My parents were tremendously supportive in helping us grow the family farm in a new direction. Since they were already farming corn and soybeans, they suggested we explore other crop options to branch off. We had both already been involved in the green industry a bit, and at the time there was a huge shortage of trees in the market. Growing trees seemed like a natural fit for us! The next task would be figuring out how to start a nursery from scratch.

After a few years of Excel spreadsheet projections, industry research, business plan writing, cash flow estimates, pitches to lenders, family brainstorming sessions, (and a few discussions over beers in the back yard)... the plan for Spring Grove Nursery took root! We chose a growing field owned by my parents with good access on IL Rt. 47. My parents used to also operate a farm drainage business, so the field was perfectly drained. Our field had been no-till farmed for over 30 years

giving us great fertility and soil structure. Both of our parents helped us get started planting. Those first years, most of our crew consisted of family & friends. It was truly a group effort and a testament to how families work together on the farm. Since tree growing is a long-term process, Jamie took a “paying” job at Caterpillar for the first 6 years while the nursery was literally “growing”. We all worked double duty those early years as the nursery established itself. We harvested our first tree in 2001 (quicker than we expected), and by 2005 we were harvesting regularly enough for Jamie to step away from his other full-time job at Cat and work solely at the nursery.

Besides our family, we had a few other key partners that helped us at the start of our journey. Ed Wiesbrook from Compeer Financial (formerly Farm Credit Services) was integral in getting us our initial funding. He helped us work with our local FSA office to get a young farmer start-up loan. To this day, Ed is still our financial partner and advises us on many issues. He has literally seen our nursery through the red to the black on the numbers side! Back in the field, our first tree suppliers were Dana Wandell from A. McGill & Sons and Jim Macy from J. Frank Schmidt Nursery. Both of them not only supplied us our first liner trees to plant, but they also offered us countless advice in our early years. Dana & Jim have both since passed away, and I'm sure they are missed by many others in this industry.

In looking back at some of our earlier documents, I found our initial business plan. The Mission Statement at the top reads, ***“To grow a quality tree for the customer and a successful business for our family with a focus on environment, community, excellence, and longevity.”*** I think it's safe to say, we still strive for that to this day.

A few other interesting notes from our original business plan were:

- We would start a 40-acre nursery with a 5-year start up process to full production. (We ended up at 90 acres and it took a little longer than 5 years.)
- We noted, *“I am convinced that we need a quality plant from the start if we want a quality plant in the end.”* That definitely rings true still to this day!
- Potential problems we identified which we might encounter were weather related issues, quarantines, or an economic crisis. From extreme winters, to droughts, to the Emerald Ash Borer, to the economic downturn of 2008-2012, I am pretty sure we have experienced them all! I particularly like this line in my plan, *“The last potential problem that could arise is that we do not have a quality product to offer. That is not an option.”*
- We end our original business plan outlining reasons “Why This Will Succeed.” We list them as Commitment, Education, Quality Products, Great Market, Superior Field Conditions,

Location & Accessibility, Long-term Focus, and Community. In the detail about community we wrote, *“Growing trees for people is a good thing. If a business is community focused it is already successful.”*

When we were wrestling with the decision to actually step forward and start the nursery (which wasn't something to step in to lightly), my dad gave us some great advice. We were worried about the timing; if we start now and the trees take a while to grow, how will we know the market will still be there to sell them in the future? That's a risky proposition. My dad told us that farming isn't short-term. He asked us point blank, “Is this what you want to do for the 40 years of your career? If it is, then don't try to time it, just step forward and do it.” So, 20 years ago we took our first step. We planted our first crop of trees and put down our own roots here on our family farm. We didn't do it by ourselves, which makes the journey that much better. Our family, our industry partners & friends, and our customers have all been a part of our growth. We couldn't be more thankful for each and every one of them.

Our farm has grown in many other ways too. Our son Joey was born, so both of our kids grew up right along with the nursery. Joey even started his own tree business, Canopy Joe, as his high school FFA project. Our daughter Maggie was recently married. Her new husband Zach has worked with us in the nursery as well, and he now pursues a career in Crop Science & Plant Genetics. My brother, Chris Harford, entered into the family farm by starting his own venture, iTrees.com. My parents have since retired, and Chris now farms the corn and soybean operation. Chris' wife, Marlee, now runs iTrees.com. Their children are growing up on the farm too. It is truly a family operation around here. During planting and harvest seasons, you often find many of our other siblings, nieces, and nephews coming home to the farm to pitch in. We are looking forward to passing these traditions of community and hard work down to the 7<sup>th</sup> generation on our family farm!

So, at the beginning of this reflection, I wrote that a milestone gives us an opportunity to stop and pause a bit – reflecting on how we started, how we have grown, and what we envision for our next 20 years. In following articles, I will elaborate on how the nursery has grown over the years – more about our trees, our customers, and our industry partners & friends. And I will wrap up in another writing about what we envision going forward. Where will the next 20 years take us? It has certainly been interesting to look back at where we thought the first 20 years would lead. For the most part, our original plan was pretty spot on. Our 20<sup>th</sup> planting season is coming up this month. For now, we will keep planting and growing for the future!

Becky Thomas, President