



We are celebrating 20 Years!

Spring Grove Nursery took root back in 1999, so as 2020 kicks off we begin a new adventure for the next 20 years! 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 future.

Earlier this spring, I wrote “SGN Roots – From the Ground Up” which talks about how our nursery took root in 1999. To read more about that part of our story, visit our website blog at <https://springgrovenursery.com/sgn-roots-part-1-from-the-ground-up/> As we begin a new growing season in the nursery, I thought it would be fitting to share a bit about the “growing” phase of our nursery – more about our Trees, our Team, our Customers, our Industry Partners, and our Farm.

Our Trees

When we began growing trees in 1999, our palate of varieties was much smaller than it is now. We started out planting the “bread & butter” trees – species that were in high demand like Maples, Honeylocust, Ash, Pine, Oak, Crab and Linden. Looking back at our first planting records we planted about 29 different types of trees in our early years. Our planting mix has evolved over the last 20 years, and we are currently **growing over 140 different species of trees**. Early on, we partnered with 4 or 5 different liner suppliers, many of which are still growers we work with today. From the beginning, we have always been extremely selective with the lining out stock we plant in our fields. To grow the specimen trees we strive for, it is imperative to start with quality liners. Through research, experience, and evaluations we are always looking for the best tree species to plant in the nursery. Our long-standing relationships in the industry help us stay on top of the latest plant developments.

In 2002, a little know pest at the time, Emerald Ash Borer, arrived in the Midwest. While the pest was still only in Michigan, we kept a close eye on the situation and decided to proactively cut Ash out of our planting rotation until the problem hopefully blew over. As we all know now it didn’t, and Ash quickly disappeared from the planting mix in most nurseries. When deciding what to replace Ash

with in our fields, we decided to step out of our comfort zone and begin growing a much more **diverse mix of trees**. We know that in the landscape, a healthy canopy does not have more than 10-20% of the same species on a project. We took the same approach in our fields and quickly jumped from about 30 species to the over 140 species we grow now. As a smaller nursery, the new approach is sometimes hard to manage because instead of having a large supply of a few species we have a smaller supply of multiple species. But in the long run, we knew it was a better fit for our customers and a healthier approach for the landscape we supply.

Throughout our 20 years of growing, we have also continued to partner with people, nurseries, and organizations who develop and produce tree varieties **well suited for our Midwest climate**. We are proud to grow plant releases from the National Arboretum in Washington D.C. such as 'Sun Valley' Red Maple as well as several selections from the Chicagoland Grows® program such as State Street® Maple, Crescendo Sugar Maple, Exclamation! London Planetree, Accolade™ Elm, Beijing Gold Lilac, and Triumph™ Elm. For a more in depth look at how we grow trees on our farm, visit the SGN Trees page on our website at <https://springgrovenursery.com/sgn-trees/>

Our Team

Key to all good businesses is the team that gets the job done. Our employees over the years have been integral in the success of our nursery. Jose Avila is our Production Supervisor and has been with us for 16 of our 20 years. We couldn't do what we do without his dedication to growing perfect trees. Some of our newer team members are also showing that same attention to detail, and we are looking forward to helping them develop their careers at our nursery in the years to come.

In addition to our dedicated employees, we work hand in hand with our partners in the family farm operation, Chris & Marlee Harford. Chris (Becky's brother) and Marlee operate Harford Farms, the family corn & soybean operation, as well as iTrees.com, a retail tree planting company. Not only are they one of our favorite customers, but they also help out in the nursery during planting & harvest seasons. And just like any family farm operation, we chip in when they need an extra hand. Working and supporting each other's goals is what family farms are all about, and we wouldn't have gotten through the last 20 years without this **great team of family & employees**.

Our Customers

When we developed our business plan, we wanted to focus on finding customers that were more than "just a sale". From the start, we have thought of **our customers as partners** in our growing business. Many of our customers have been buying our trees from the start, and we value that relationship. By growing trees, we are given the opportunity to partner with great people in this

industry. Growing doesn't end when our tree is harvested. The relationship continues to grow as we follow how our trees are doing on their projects and make plans for what we can be growing for them in the future. Each segment of the Green Industry has different needs from their grower. From Park Districts or Municipalities to Landscape Contractors or Garden Centers. From Landscape Architects or Designers to Rewholesale Operations, we love connecting with our customers and growing trees and friendships along the way.

Our Green Industry Partners

Growing trees is one of the best jobs ever. And key to that is being a part of the Green Industry. Some of the finest people we have met are industry partners and friends. From day one, we have been actively involved in the Illinois Green Industry Association, the Illinois Landscape Contractors Association, and American Hort. These great organizations elevate our profession and add value in many different ways both personally and in our nursery.

In 2012, we were honored to be invited to join the Ornamental Growers Association of Northern Illinois. This organization of well-respected Growers dates back to the early 1940's and represents an elite mix of nurseries what hold a high quality of excellence. Our regular collaborations with the other nurseries have given us some of our most ***valued friendships in the Green Industry.***

Our Farm

For six generations, our family has cultivated and crafted ***strong roots in agriculture.*** With this understanding of the land and respect for the natural process, our nursery has grown to encompass this passion. Farming requires a long-term vision that encompasses both the land and the family structure. We strive every day to honor the tradition we have been entrusted with during our generation.

Our ***commitment to conservation*** started long ago when Becky's parents became one of the first farms in the country to practice no-till farming in row crop agriculture. This care for the land provides our roots with a soil structure that is naturally porous and rich in organic matter. By understanding what happens beneath the soil, we can afford our trees the proper environment to develop a strong and healthy root structure. Planting cover crops and grass strips in the nursery, along with minimal tillage practices helps us preserve our most precious resource. We respect the relationship between our trees and the soil in which they grow, and we also respect the soil for what it will provide for many generations to come.

Growing Forward!

At the beginning of this reflection, I wrote that milestones 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. To kick off our 21st year this season, we will soon be moving into our new nursery office & shed. The project has been 20 years in the making, and we are excited to share our brand-new facility with our employees & customers. Adding some key infrastructure will allow us the room to care for our equipment, increase efficiency, and improve our employee experience. We built upon our family farm heritage and re-purposed some building materials from old farm buildings. Preserving our farm history on our new project keep us ***connected to our roots.***

And when springtime rolls around, we plant a new crop of trees! Growing a long-cycled crop like trees takes patience, forethought, and risk. Every spring we plant a full crop into our fields for the future. Part of our success over the years has been our consistent planting schedule and commitment to the future of our nursery. The next 20 years will be no different. Every spring we will spend each day in the present – getting the job done and growing our trees to the standard of excellence we have grown to be known for. Every spring we will also spend each day reflecting on the great traditions of farming that have helped us get to where we are now. And every spring we will also look ahead at how we can best honor the land, the heritage, the trees, and the people who make Spring Grove Nursery grow into our branch of this legacy.

For now, we will keep planting and growing for the future!

Becky Thomas, President