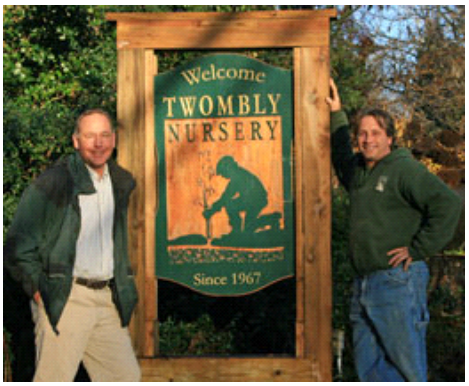
GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

12/20/2011

Neighborly Nursery

Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio



The 12 acres that make up Twombly Nursery in Monroe, Connecticut, are surrounded by homes. While "good fences make good neighbors," owners Andrew Brodtman and Barry Bonin believe in more than being just a good neighbor. For instance, when an elderly neighbor and her dog walked to the nursery to ask Andrew the name of a repairman, he made an introductory phone call for her. Sharing property lines has other advantages—the neighbors get their driveways plowed in the winter and their yards planted in the spring.

Twombly Nursery began as a tree service business in the late 1960s. It developed into a nursery where Andrew worked upon completion of his Landscape Architecture degree. He did landscape design and installation for more than 10 years before he and Barry, another employee, bought the business in the mid-2000s. They own 3.5 acres, lease the rest of the property, and are looking into leasing additional land. The retail area, administrative offices and four-season garden cover 4 acres, while the outdoor-only growing area is on 3 acres. Hoop houses protect the broad-leafed evergreens and other delicate plants from winter wind damage.

Andrew and Barry grow Spirea, Japanese maples and dwarf conifers. They grow and sell specimens of larger sizes, such as 20- to 30-ft. trees. They harvest trees at a 4-in. caliper or above. Andrew says, "It's too easy to find 2-in. caliper trees, so it doesn't make sense for us to grow them." He says nurseries in the area don't do mature trees due to lack of buyers, proper equipment or land.

They buy in bareroot stock and can sell 200 Miss Kim lilacs during a season—good for the gardener who is unwilling to feed the teeming deer population in Connecticut. Andrew and Barry grow herbs and some vegetables for the hobbyists and impulse buyers. They've introduced a rare Twombly Red Sentinel. It's a red leaf Japanese maple that grows 18 ft. high and 8 ft. wide, with an upright habit, and is good for smaller gardens. If they can't find a particular specimen or they're selling 100 to 200 of a specific plant, they'll grow them.

Andrew takes two weeks per year, one in the summer and one in the winter, to tag. "Is that a vacation?" he asks. Barry travels, also, to Oregon, Ohio and the southern states to tag material. "Seventy percent of the

things that come in, we see first," says Andrew.

Oregon is a destination because, "what takes five years to grow there, takes seven years to grow in the Northeast," says Andrew. They choose wisely, looking for the best material, the rarest and the most unusual that their customers can't get anywhere else. Andrew and Barry are careful about what they choose for their location. "We can't do Zones 7 or 8; we used to be Zone 6A, but after the last few winters we're 5B,"says Andrew.

"We never close," says Andrew, but they do shut down for the winter, which gives Andrew and Barry time to make repairs on the equipment, paint, review past jobs, and place spring orders. "There's always work to do," he adds.

The staff shifts in size from 20 to 25 during the busy season, down to five or six in the winter. Some of the employees have accrued dozens of years at the nursery—longevity is good for business as customers ask for the employees by name and will stand for no substitutions. "What we can't do financially for our people, we do by treating them like they're family; and as long as we're able, we'll contribute to their health insurance and 401(k)s," says Andrew.

Designers come from Manhattan, Greenwich, Connecticut and Massachusetts for the material they can't find anywhere else. Andrew and Barry offer masonry services, work on others' landscape designs, plus implement their own creations—about 50 a year. A very diverse clientele, says Andrew, can buy hundreds of plants, one plant or 10 evergreens.

The landscape designer or gardener who wants a cherry tree with a serpentine trunk, an 18-ft. holly or plantings for rooftop gardens and courtyards in Manhattan knows to come to Twombly Nursery. The retail customer base is more female than male, says Andrew. Every week, two women walk the nursery, sometimes they buy, and sometimes they don't. Andrew calls them the "Thursday Ladies."

Andrew and Barry take care not only of their neighbors, but the wildlife, too. A customer can't have that Paper Bark Maple he purchased until the nested birds leave for another location.

> **Money-saving ideas and tips for other growers:**

- "Buy in more bareroot material."
- "We'd love to be more energy efficient—we'd love to have the money to get a windmill."
- "We're not outsourcing. We do our own in-house advertising and email marketing to 5,000 email customers. We have a pre-sale event for email customers two weeks before the sale is open to the public."
- "Our wives work in the business in marketing, advertising and bookkeeping. There is flexibility in having family work for us."
- "We keep a reliable customer base. We have a lot of high-end buyers, but we make the people who aren't high-end feel like they are. We give them the personal touch; we are a 'mom-and-pop' operation." **GT**

Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio is a freelance writer in New Rochelle, New York.