

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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A Place for Plants and People

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Established in 1981, Greenleaf Industries in Grants Pass, Oregon, has evolved into a unique growing organization, merging education, sales and wellness in one place. The West Coast's largest non-profit nursery, Greenleaf Industries has taken growing to the next level, facilitating the vital connection between plants and people.

Director Nick Smith initially became involved in the operation at the young age of 15, following his mother, who worked in the retail store.

"I started by directing traffic, working seasonally for a number of years while in school. I eventually worked my way up to head grower and I've now been the director of the organization for the past six years," says Nick.

At the heart of this operation are its dedicated employees, consisting of 17 staff members, seasonal employees to assist during the busier periods and 18 developmentally disabled adults who participate in Greenleaf Industries' training facility and are employed full time throughout the year. These individuals seamlessly work together to make Greenleaf the successful non-profit organization it is today.

The idea of becoming a training facility stemmed from Greenleaf's founder David James' experience with a local 4-H program. During this venture, David discovered the employment opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities were severely limited. At the same time, he saw how they thrived with the 4-H activities and wanted to offer them something more.

"He found a need in our small community for another outlet for employment for people with disabilities," says Nick. "David's goal was to improve and develop his own model of what a non-profit can be for nursery."

Not wanting to conform to the traditional shelter workshop model, which segregates the individuals, the unique training program encourages the employees to be fully integrated into the operation. The training is adapted to the skill set of the individual, their ISP (individual support plan) and their area of interest.



One of the several extracurricular activities Greenleaf offers is the annual retreat, where the full-time employees and board members venture off to the woods for a week.

“Normally when people come in, we work with them one-on-one for a time, just to get them used to all of the different tasks and how we, in the nursery, do things,” says Nick. This flexible program encourages the employees to work in their area of interest, whether it’s watering, sowing seeds or learning how to use a cash register.

It’s perhaps this ability to work in the area of their interest that’s led to the long-term commitment of the individuals.

“Technically our program is considered a training facility, so that these individuals will be prepared for outside employment, if they so wish,” says Nick. “We were advised that the average turnover rate would be about three years, but we have some employees that have been here for more than 30 years.”

Potential applicants are screened at the state level and placed on a waiting list until an opening at Greenleaf or another desirable facility opens. With a low turnover rate, the waiting list to be a part of Greenleaf is a long one—and it’s no wonder—this initiative is truly one of a kind.

Within the facility, there are several projects, from the vegetable display garden to the 4-H beds where the produce is donated to the employees and local food banks. At the retail location, display beds are appreciated for both their aesthetics and to trial potential plants for the future.

“The trial beds allow us to experiment with new varieties, with our goal being to find the varieties that will not just survive, but thrive,” says Nick.

Producing over 2.5 million plants a year, including 300 varieties of bedding plants and vegetables, it’s an extremely busy facility selling plants to landscapers, wholesalers and at their retail store.

Members of the American Horticulture Therapy Association, Greenleaf Industries is a strong advocate of the benefits of plants and nature for everyone. In addition to what happens on-site, the company is actively

involved with several community school programs and other non-profit organizations, offering tours, education and donations. Today, Greenleaf Industries continues to maintain a strong connection with the 4-H program in the local community. One of the benefits of the program, shares Nick, is that developmentally disabled individuals can become life-long members. Each summer, the employees at Greenleaf enter vegetables, plants and flowers that they've grown for their local 4-H club.

More than just a growing business

For their employees, Greenleaf Industries is deeply invested in their well-being, with several extracurricular activities throughout the year, including barbeques, special luncheons and pool parties. One of the most memorable events is the annual retreat, where the full-time employees and board members venture off to the woods for a week.

"A lot of our employees don't have a lot of access to going camping and simply getting outdoors," says Nick. "The retreat is a great way to get everybody out there and thank them for a year's worth of contribution."

This annual event includes crafts, a large bingo game, celebration of their 4-H ribbons and a dance with the music provided by Dave, the founder, and his band.

Ninety percent self-sufficient, Greenleaf Industries doesn't do any fundraisers; instead they sustain the company through the profit retained from plant sales and related services, including the holiday wreaths that the employees make for Christmas.

"That's how we survive, that's how we thrive," says Nick. The exception to this rule is when Greenleaf takes on large initiatives, like the current solar panel and rain harvesting venture, where Nick applies for grants for the capital expenditures.

To further fulfill the company's sustainability initiatives, Greenleaf has been working on several energy-conserving projects, including the recent installation of solar panels on two of the work buildings, watering troughs—which are currently growing cabbage and kale—and setting up the infrastructure to rain harvest 50,000 gal. of stored water off of the poly greenhouse.

"It's our initiative to use less. We all live in the community," says Nick. "Oregon has been hit multiple years in a row with a drought. While we are not running out of water, we would like to rely less on ground water."

With two of the projects currently up and running, the rain harvesting venture isn't far behind. The electrical inspection is complete, says Nick, and the barrels are full—the only item remaining is to treat the water for use.

"We want to put a little bit more green into Greenleaf," says Nick. "We are thrilled to get these projects up and running and diminish our footprint."

Running this type of nursery, including their unique training program, doesn't come without its challenges. It requires careful adherence to several rigors, including mandatory state reporting, additional safety regulations and background checks. However, the additional work, shares Nick, is well worth the reward of

coming to a place of employment where everyone feels valued.

“Almost everybody feels like they are not just coming to work, that they are a part of a family,” says Nick. “I’ve never seen another place quite like this. It’s a pretty great program.” **GT**

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