

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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In Memoriam: Jack Bigej

Chris Beytes

Pioneering Oregon garden center owner Jack Bigej, owner of Al's Garden Center (aka Al's Garden & Home), passed away February 26 after a battle with an aggressive form of leukemia.

Born in 1941, Jack went to work in his father's roadside fruit stand (an abandoned chicken coop) during high school. Al offered his son \$1.25 an hour plus half of anything they made above the previous year. To boost sales, Jack brought plants into the fruit stand, increasing business by \$7,400 and earning himself a check for \$3,700.

"He paid me with no problem," Jack reminisced on the company website. "But he had the bookkeeper look over the books three times to make sure they were right! He couldn't believe we had done so much better. So that's how Al's got into the plant business."

Jack took the business from Al's Fruit Stand to Al's Fruit & Shrub in the 1950s. Al left this new side of the business to Jack and remained focused on the fruit sales, and by 1961, Jack was brought into his business as a partner. The nursery side of the business flourished, and in 1970, the old chicken coop was replaced by a new building combining the fruit and the expanding nursery business. Today, Al's Garden Center has four locations, plus a production location, and all four of Jack and wife, Deanna's, children are active in the business.

Last October, Jack was honored by Oregon State University, who inducted him into the College of Agricultural Science's Hall of Fame.

"The Hall of Fame Award is one of the highest honors that the College of Agricultural Sciences bestows," said Dean of Agriculture Staci Simonich. "It recognizes those individuals who have made outstanding contributions to agriculture and natural resources."

"I have no idea why I won this award. I haven't done anything in the industry ... I've hung around a long time," Jack said with a chuckle. "I was flabbergasted. It should be an industry award because it's the industry and it's the people who make the industry." **GT**