

# A growing passion

## *An education helps Randy Davis find a fulfilling career*

Plant a seed and it will grow. The adage is true not only when it comes to plants, but also in finding one's passion. Randy Davis knows this from experience.

Davis began to find his life's passion as a high school student employed at Greenleaf Nursery in Park Hill, Okla., during the summers. While working at his summer job, Davis began to consider his future.

"I was going to go to Northeastern [State University] to be a teacher," Davis said. "My dad was a teacher, and I was going to go to Northeastern because I could afford it. I thought OSU was too expensive."

Although Davis had a plan, he was not overly enthusiastic about it.

Then opportunity knocked. Austin Kenyon, an Oklahoma State University graduate who was the Greenleaf production manager at the time, asked Davis if he had considered attending school in Stillwater. After Davis told Kenyon he had but thought it would be too expensive, Kenyon and Gil Nickel, co-owner of Greenleaf, offered him the Greenleaf Scholarship.

The scholarship was originally intended to be a one-time-only offer specifically for Davis and would pay for his tuition, fees and books to attend OSU. Davis was excited about the opportunity.

"I developed a love for plants at home in the garden," Davis said. "It was a thrill to see one grow and develop into a big plant. I'm still amazed by the process."

Davis graduated from OSU in December 1975 with a degree in horticulture. He

immediately returned to work at Greenleaf as a propagation supervisor, a position he would hold for 18 years. Then he was promoted and spent five years as the company's vice president and production manager. In 2000, Davis became the company's president and chief executive officer.

When Davis was first presented with the opportunity to come to OSU, he said he could not have imagined the success that would follow when he returned to Greenleaf.

"I'm a goal setter," Davis said. "I'm a firm believer that you set where you want to get to in life. It's that way about everything. You have to set your life in the direction you want to go, realizing you don't always have total control. Sometimes you achieve success you didn't envision."

Although his achievements have far surpassed any expectations he had, Davis is most satisfied in having a career he loves.

"It's been pretty amazing. It's so neat because I have such a passion for my work. I love Greenleaf Nursery," Davis said. "To me, that's the important thing, for you or for anyone. Whatever you go into for your career, you should have a passion for it. If you don't, then you ought to get into something you do have a passion for. I tell people that all the time, 'Whatever you do, make sure you have a passion for it.' Life's too short not to enjoy it," he said.

Kenyon said the opportunities Davis had as a student at OSU have been vital to Davis' success.

"You see so many students like Randy,

and that's what OSU does: it gives rural kids an opportunity to meet their expectations," Kenyon said.

### **Greenleaf and the OSU Connection**

Davis is one of 16 OSU alumni who work for Greenleaf Nursery. Two of those alumni are also two of the company's owners. Kenyon is a graduate of the OSU Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture, and Nickel studied math and physics. In addition to their positions as co-chairmen of the board for Greenleaf, the two recently earned other important distinctions. They were recognized in 2003 as OSU Distinguished Alumni. For Kenyon, it was a moving honor.

"I'm extremely humbled," Kenyon said. "A lot of people are more deserving than I am, but it's an honor I'll always cherish."

Greenleaf also has OSU graduates employed in six of its top management positions. Seven of the company's production supervisors are also OSU alumni.

"The people who have come from OSU have been successful at Greenleaf and have made Greenleaf successful," Davis said. "OSU has helped create passion and enthusiasm, and the company looks for people like that."

Greenleaf has not always had far to look for such people. Although Davis' scholarship was originally a one-time-only award, the company has since provided the scholarship so other employees could attend college. Laci Couch, planting supervisor at the Oklahoma division, graduated from OSU with a degree in horticulture in May 2003. She said the scholarship was instrumental in helping her find a career she loves.

"I was originally going to school to be a teacher," Couch said. "My grades weren't what they should have been, and I thought 'Obviously, this isn't what I'm supposed to do.' I didn't like classes; I didn't enjoy it."

Couch had been studying at Northeastern State University but dropped out. She enrolled at the Indian Capital Technology Center in Tahlequah for a year and took horticulture classes. She enjoyed her classes but wanted to learn more.

"I liked when I was working in greenhouses at the CareerTech but felt cheated because all I learned about was green-



*Randy Davis, president and chief executive officer of Greenleaf Nursery, began his career while in high school.*



The shipping facility lies in the foreground of Greenleaf's Park Hill location. The location has 600 acres in production. (Photos by Justin Day)

houses," Couch said. "Then I was told I could get a job here [at Greenleaf], and I thought it was the perfect opportunity to see if this is what I wanted to do."

Even while she was working at Greenleaf, Couch wanted to go back to school. The opportunity to attend OSU through the Greenleaf Scholarship helped her finish her education while learning more about the work she enjoyed. Couch is pleased with the way things have turned out.

"I absolutely enjoy what I'm doing now," Couch said.

### A Growing Company

Greenleaf Nursery has grown tremendously since the time Davis became an employee. A closer look at the company's history shows it has enjoyed a rapid growth since its inception.

Greenleaf Nursery was founded in Muskogee, Okla., in 1945 by Harold and Rebecca Nickel. The company originally operated as a small retail outlet, but soon began experiments in growing plant material in containers. John Nickel, a son and business partner, looked to expand the company.

"There wasn't enough room in Muskogee to get any bigger, and they wanted to expand," Davis said.

Nickel began searching eastern Oklahoma for land to purchase and found a spot near Park Hill, Okla. The property lies 35 miles east of Muskogee on Lake Tenkiller and is the present-day location of the company's headquarters. Davis said the Park Hill location has grown from 100 acres to 600 acres in the time he has been employed at Greenleaf.

"I think [John Nickel] would tell you he never dreamed it would get this large," Davis said.

Along with the growth in land area at Greenleaf, Davis said the company has also grown in the areas of technology and plant diversity. Greenleaf has been a leader in innovations in over-wintering procedures for

plants. The innovations began as a result of the harsh winter in 1962-63 that resulted in the loss of 90 percent of that year's saleable crop.

After that winter's loss, the company began to propagate and grow hardier types of plant material such as deciduous shrubs and shade trees. Over-wintering procedures also were put in place the following fall. Research and development of winter protection is an ongoing process at Greenleaf today. Davis said the innovations made by Greenleaf extend beyond over-wintering procedures.

"We're very innovative in production techniques and not just winterizing techniques," Davis said. "I would say we've been innovative in all production techniques."

Another of the innovations Greenleaf prides itself on is the use of a water recycling system in place at the Park Hill facility. All of the water used for irrigation at the nursery is recycled on site and used again.

"We did this on our own without the Environmental Protection Agency telling us we had to," Davis said. "It was something our owners looked at and said 'We're going to do this because it's the right thing to do.'"

Because of growth and innovations,

Greenleaf has had to expand to new places over the years. In the 1970s, a second growing facility was purchased in El Campo, Texas, approximately 75 miles southwest of Houston. Davis said the El Campo location was chosen mainly because of the climate provided by the area's long growing season and milder winters.

"It was mostly started for the growing climate, but we wanted to develop the southern market, too," Davis said.

Today, the Texas operation boasts 400 acres in production, making it one of the largest container nurseries in the state.

In 1984, Greenleaf purchased and put into production a nursery around a small hidden lake near Fort Gibson, Okla. The nursery's purpose was to provide a facility for the low-cost production of tree whips and seedlings for the Park Hill and El Campo container divisions. A 14,000-square-foot grading was erected on the Fort Gibson property in 1990 for the purpose of sorting bare root tree whips prior to shipment to the cold storage facility at Park Hill.

The grading at Fort Gibson was constructed in conjunction with a 239,400-cubic-foot cold storage facility at the container

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Laci Couch, planting supervisor, inspects some of the nursery's plants before winterizing procedures begin.

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division in Park Hill. The facility creates a humidified, temperature-controlled environment to maintain the high quality and vigor of trees. These constructions allowed Greenleaf to begin marketing its bare root trees and seedlings in spring 1991.

Greenleaf added another new location in 1997 when 295 acres of land were purchased in Tarboro, N.C. The Tarboro facility is a diverse, complete product line, a smaller version of the Oklahoma and Texas operations. Davis said the North Carolina division was opened because of its closer locale to Greenleaf's eastern market.

"We sell a lot of plant material in that area," Davis said. "We felt we could provide more for our customers by being there."

Today, Greenleaf is the third largest nursery in the United States. During the

peak season, the nursery employs 1,200 people in its facilities in Oklahoma, Texas and North Carolina. In Oklahoma alone, Greenleaf produces more than 10 million liners and 8.5 million finished plants. These plants include 70 varieties of conifers, 570 varieties of broadleaf evergreens and deciduous shrubs, and 145 varieties of shade and flowering trees, Davis said. The diversity of plants the company produces has been one of the biggest changes since he has worked there.

"Diversity in plants has seen a huge change," Davis said. "People want something different. It's a real challenge to keep up."

Greenleaf currently ships to 45 states and Canada. The company has enjoyed having a positive economic impact in eastern Oklahoma, as well as in its other locations.

"It is one of Cherokee County's [Oklahoma] major industries with much of the revenue being paid out locally," Davis said.

Greenleaf has followed the path of many of its products by taking root and growing steadily. Davis looks for that growth to continue.

"We're a company that believes in controlled growth," Davis said. "We're not interested in mergers or acquisitions. [We're] not really the biggest, but our goal is to be one of the best."

"I see us continuing to grow and prosper, and that's through controlled growth, good decision making, and planning," he said. "I'd say the future looks bright for Greenleaf. We've got a lot of good OSU graduates on hand and a good business plan. I'm really excited about Greenleaf for the future." ♦

*By Justin Day, Camargo, Okla.*