

ness plan that actually makes money."

We've all heard the line about location, location, location. "Because we're right next to Montpelier and we're kind of sandwiched between Montpelier and Barboursville, which I would say are two of the larger tourist attractions, that we really want to make this not just a market for local folks to come with their families, but people from far away."

Dan admits that, "There are going to be some negatives...there will be a lot more traffic. But," he adds, brightening, "it's the right kind of traffic. It's tourism, it's pulling people into the community for agricultural purposes. So, hopefully people see it that way."

He hopes the neighbors agree, because community is important to Dan Gregg. He is the president of the Orange Downtown Alliance; recently gave a stirring talk about "making some change and having some progress in Orange." He puts his money where his mouth is. Just recently Grelen donated a landscaping project to the town. A bulletin board in the office is festooned with thank-you letters from some 30 local charities. "For any business you've got to support the community you're in," says Gregg, modestly. "Without the community we don't have our clients. It all ties in. Any good business works closely with its community."

And so Dan Gregg wants the Grelen Farm Market to be a good neighbor. And although it cannot go totally organic (because certain pesticides are unavoidable in a nursery such as this), it can come close. "To me, what's important is that you're pesticide responsible," emphasizes Gregg. "Integrated pest management is a movement within the nursery trade that you only spray what needs to be sprayed and when it needs to be sprayed. You wait until you see an infestation and then you target that specific infestation. And you use the least toxic chemicals available for that infestation. And that's what we've done all along at the nursery and we will continue that. I bet we spray less chemical in this entire nursery in a year than one of the vineyards does in one application."

They even have plans to erect a windmill and install solar panels at Grelen. "I think the whole 'buy local' (movement) makes so much sense in so many different ways. It preserves the open land, open space. It uses less energy; the carbon footprint is much less because you're not shipping the food distances; you're not driving farther to get it. And then the whole idea of educating the community into the value of having farms...It's a way to make agriculture profitable, where you still use the land for agricultural purposes, but it's more marketing intensive."

Dan Gregg looks out over the shallow valley and says his ultimate dream for this place includes a camp for inner city kids. "I'm kind of looking at how I got interested in this from my grandmother, when she handed me the handful of seeds. Well, we want to hand inner city kids the same opportunity. I would love to be able to create an opportunity for some of those children who don't have the opportunity within the city to come out to the country, come to a place like Grelen, work for half a day. And then the other half of the day, be a regular kids camp, playing baseball, fishing in the pond, hiking in the woods. Maybe one out of a 100 kids that come here; will get hooked and will take the handful of seeds and do something with it."



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
These "bare roots" saplings were planted recently at the rate of 1,000 per day on Grelen's new ground near Jacksontown. Dan Gregg says the rich Davidson soil lets him grow out trees in three years instead of four.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
Grelen co-partner, Zeke Galvin with a recently planted peach tree that will, in three years, become a part of a proposed pick-your-own operation near Jacksontown.



For Dan Gregg, it all started with a handful of seeds. He was 15 at the time, a city kid down here in Orange for a week on the family farm, hands blistered from hoeing thistles, red clay staining his jeans. His grandmother, Mary Allen Garland Gregg, called him into her office. "Here, I'm going to give you these seeds." "What am I going to do with these?" he queried. "I want you to take them home and plant them," she responded.

## A handful of seeds

Dan sighed audibly. "I went home to Cincinnati, went to go plant them and dug into the ground and the soil was yellow clay, this nasty stuff." But then he remembered the grass clippings and dead leaves that he'd carted off to the woods. He placed two large clods of clay in buckets, mixed them with the compost, "and I made a little garden the first year that is probably half the size of this table."



PHOTOS BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
Top photo, just across the street from Grelen is Somerset Seed and Sod. Both Orange County agricultural enterprises rely heavily on the rich soil in this area. Above, Dan Gregg unfurls plans for a pick-your-own farm market at Grelen. Subject to local approval, he hopes to have the operation up and running a year from now. He may even be able to open on a limited basis this coming summer.

He thumps a wooden table four by four feet square. It sits in his office in front of a second-story window of a renovated farmhouse in Jacksontown. The window looks out over the 480-acre nursery that is Grelen. This is a far cry from a tiny plot of yellow clay and lawn clippings.

"I truly remember boiling like six string beans and eating them for dinner," continues Greg. "Six beans! And I thought it was so cool. Hey! I can grow something and you can eat what you grow." He looks up in boyish wonder. "This something inside me just kind of clicked." He even sold some of his produce to his mother. "It was grow local, buy local. It's as local as you can be."

He surveys the rows of everything from tree saplings to blueberries, the yard teeming with work crews and trucks, the two huge tree spades poised and ready, the piles of landscaping stones, the rows and rows of shrubs, the hillside covered with recently planted fruit trees. Architects' plans bloom on his desk. The phone is ringing off the hook. You might say Dan Gregg has come a long way since his grandmother thrust that handful of seeds at him. He's branched out a tad since he sold some string beans to his mama.

"Everybody said, you've got the right soils, you've got the right source of water, you're in a great geographical location for growing trees. It's a no-brainer; you should start a nursery at Grelen." And so he did.

But not on a lark. The original motivation was to save the family farm. Armed with an economics degree from Duke and some practical experience as a Baltimore banker, he moved here after his grandmother died because, "I didn't want to see the farm sold." But then his aunt passed away, and the family had no choice. Luckily, the right people, Mark and Ann Kington, bought Grelen. Dan, who by now had gotten out of banking and

into learning about the nursery business, kept 50 acres on which to establish his operation. "Now I'm in my 20th year of operation, and it's just grown and grown and grown."

In fact, he soon realized he was going to grow himself out of business if he didn't find a bigger location. So he sold the 50 acres to the Kingtons, leased it back, and went looking for another place. The current site, not far from Montpelier, took him two years to find.

The farm he chose is a natural bowl in a shallow valley that sweeps up to a windy hilltop with a spectacular view of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Why here? "It has all to do with Davidson soil," he responds. "Our soils allow us to grow a tree in three years where it would take most nurseries four years. There's about a 25 percent improvement in growth rate. Davidson soils are just great great soils. That's why we bought the farm next to us because we knew we would run out of space here."

Somerset Seed and Sod (See April 27th, 2006 *Insider*) is located right across the street, and that's a sign of the times. Some farms and farming practices in Orange County, especially in highly productive soil, are being replaced not by houses but by agricultural enterprises such as these. The highest and best use for this land is still agriculture. Always was; always will be.

You will note that we didn't say it is not suitable for business, because Grelen is a business, and a highly successful one at that, with a clear vision for the future. Originally, the plan was to grow only wholesale; not even deal with the public. But Dan noticed that landscape architects were bringing clients to the nursery to see what certain trees and shrubs looked like growing out in a field. He started selling to the public, and in so doing, vertically integrated, "selling

to the end user...very much like what vegetable farmers are doing now."

The public wanted more. Twelve years ago, Grelen widened its scope to include a landscaping service by hiring Zeke Galvin. Today, Grelen offers all manner of landscaping: patios, retaining walls, terraces, you name it. Dan, who made Zeke his business partner, says unabashedly, "He's the best thing that ever happened to the nursery. He took the bull by the horns, and now landscaping is the driving force behind this business. I would say that landscaping generates almost 90 percent of our sales."

Now they are thinking of vertically integrating downward; getting into the propagation business. "My goal 20 years from now," ponders Dan, "is hopefully my children will be running the operation. ... that everything will be produced at the nursery: seedlings, scion wood for grafting, the cuttings for rootings, all that will come from the nursery and be planted from the very start to finish, and we'll be selling to the end user. So we'll do the whole thing."

He unfurls an architect's drawing of what looks like a beautiful garden leading from a modest country house. This is not just another client's landscaping dream come true; it is his. These are plans for a farm market, a place where you can pick your own fruits and vegetables, grown right here and by neighboring farmers. It is the essence of "grow local, buy local, eat local."

Grelen has planted rows and rows of blackberries, raspberries, blueberries. Across the swale, five varieties of apples bloom on a hill side. They are joined by three kinds of peaches, Asian pears, cherries.

Dan and Zeke hope the farm market will open one year from now. In fact it may be open on a limited basis this summer. This past fall they picked "at least 300 quarts of raspberries, and that's the first season. We're just going to have gobs of them this year, and by next year it will be insane."

They've even inoculated logs in the woods with oyster and shiitake mushroom spores. They've rooted 1,000 asparagus plants in the space between the trees in the rows. They'll plant veggies. "I don't think we're going to make money selling asparagus," says Gregg realistically. "But, if we pull people in and they're buying a little bit of this and a little bit of that...if we can get the people here, there will be enough things to purchase that all together we can make a busi-

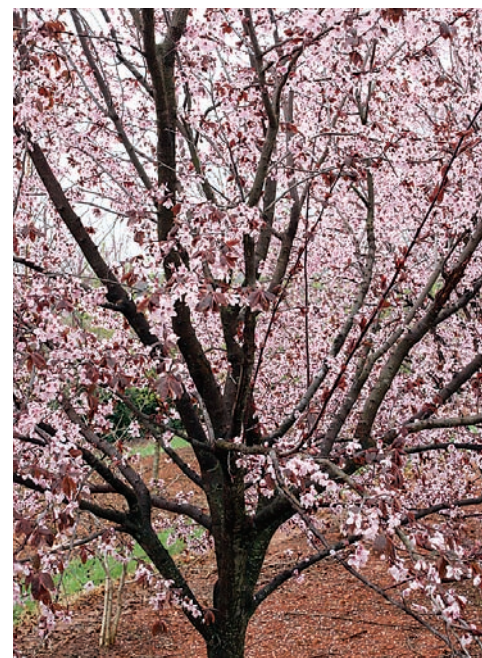


PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
Grelen offers 200 varieties of trees, both native and non native. The local nursery grows, sells, and plants trees from 2 to 10 inches in diameter.

# Do you want some landscaping with that new house?

Few of us are as forward thinking as Peter the Great. He did all the landscaping for his signature city BEFORE he laid the first stone for the first building. That way, when the palaces of St. Petersburg were complete, they looked like they had always been there.

Of course, Peter the Great wasn't dealing with a recession. Dan Gregg and the folks at Grelen Nursery are. Dan paints a typical scenario for new home builders: "They get the house built; it's over budget; so there's no money left for landscaping. We find that all the time," he laments. When you're trying to save money on a project, landscaping is usually the first to go. And, although no on-going jobs were cancelled last year at Grelen, "once the projects were completed, there were no new projects."

Then came the winter from hell. Hours were cut back. More hours were traded forward. And then it rained. But, as always happens, the sun came out and dried up all the rain, and the itsy bitsy...well, you get the idea.

Dan Gregg says this has been "our best spring for planting conditions. It's very wet, but once we got in the field, we planted everything in one week for the nursery." That means they actually planted—are you ready for this—6,500 trees in one week...8,000 total! They do it with a machine at a rate of "over a thousand trees a day."

And so, if the nursery business is an economic barometer for when times are tough, the converse is true. Business has picked up at Grelen. People are spending money again on not just their houses, but their yards. "Right now we're slammed," says Dan Gregg. His 35 or so busy season employees are regularly putting in 70-hour work weeks now, trading in those slack winter time hours.

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PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
Grelen employee Pennington Marchael loads shrubs for delivery and planting. After a fairly slow fall and a dead winter, business has blossomed at this nursery and landscape business.

Grelen is generally regarded as a high-end nursery and landscaping service. It caters to a moneyed clientele from Middleburg to Scottsville. But Dan Gregg has seen a change in that clientele. "It seems our middle-income folks started spending more and our higher-income clients are spending less."

Grelen specializes in trees...large trees... 200 varieties of them, including "the more unusual, Japanese maples, all sorts of ornamentals, paper bark maples, witch hazels." These trees come from all over the country as "bare roots," saplings. "So we take those trees and line them out and grow them to two-inch caliper, which is the diameter of the trunk six inches off the ground. We start selling at two-inch caliper and grow them out to 10-inch caliper trees, you know, 30-40-foot trees." He points to two giant tree spades which can dig and plant specimens with 65- and 90-inch diameter balls.

But size isn't everything. "A two-inch caliper tree and a five-inch caliper tree, in 10 years will be the same size. So if you have the patience, the smaller tree is the more frugal purchase because the small tree will catch up to the big tree."

Some people don't want to wait, particularly those who live in historic estate houses that have seen ancient trees in the yard toppled by everything from lightning to hurricanes to blizzards. "A two-inch caliper tree that's 10 feet tall just doesn't do it; doesn't

do it for the site and doesn't do it for the person," observes Gregg. And so occasionally they will get a call for a 20-inch caliper tree, worth \$5,000 right where it stands. A specialist will dig it up and lift it out with a 200-ton crane; then transport it by special permit to its new home.

The folks at Grelen work closely with local landscape architects. They also work closely with the do-it-yourselfer. Either way, clients like to go out in the field and choose their own trees. And with the addition of arborist, Rob Mathis and the proximity of Somerset Seed and Sod, Grelen has become something of a one-stop shop. Your trees, your shrubs, your lawn, your landscaping; all of it comes from here. "Clients prefer to deal with fewer people rather than more people," says Gregg. "That provides a convenience to the customer."

Asked what mistakes he sees people making, Dan Gregg responds, "Always make sure you know the mature size of the plant material that you're planting. That's the biggest mistake." He points to the weeping cherry. Today, it will look great at the corner of your house. "But," he cautions, "they're going to grow to be 40 feet tall and 40 feet wide." He also recommends that you pay attention to whether a tree prefers

wet or dry feet, and plant accordingly. Red maple, sweet bay magnolia, and river birch do well in moist soil; oaks and pines in dry. Any questions? Go to the bible: *Dirr's Hardy Trees and Shrubs*.

"Our environment here is brutal," continues Gregg. "We get the cold, we get the heat, and we get the extremes. We don't get the extremes every year. But every 10th year, we get a really cold winter or every 10th year we get a really bad drought. And then the late freezes, that's really been an issue here." He remembers a tax day in the mid-1990s, when the low was in the mid-teens. "We lost at least 50 percent of our Japanese maples that year."

No list of hazards to your landscaping is complete without mention of *Odocoileus virginianus*, the white-tailed deer. At Grelen, the critters would wipe out whole rows at a time by rubbing the bark off of every tree; that or they'd eat the foliage and nip off the buds. But since Grelen installed seven- and eight-foot tall polypropylene fences the "damage is at most 5 percent of what it was before we had the fence."

In the native versus non-native debate, we must remember that not all locals are perfect. The red bud is notoriously brittle. "They have really lousy crotches." So do Bradford Pears, which are probably the most popular spring flowering tree in these parts.

Dan comments, "We specialize in a lot of unusuals. We have some unusual natives, but we have a lot of unusual non natives: trees from Asia. I think there's some truth in the fact that if you plant native trees and shrubs you're less likely to have disease and pest issues. But there are also a lot of unusuals that are from other parts of the world that do not have disease and pest issues."

One particular pest might be named "farm manager chain saw disease." Dan Gregg tells a story. Grelen had planted some conifers for a client. But come winter time, they dried up, lost their needles, and turned an ominous rust color. "The farm manager cut them all down and said the pine trees had died." Dan smiles ruefully. "They weren't dead; they were just deciduous trees." He points to a row of bald cypress, standing brittle, brown and dead looking. They are a deciduous conifer. That's right, a pine tree that loses its leaves. Right about now they're, uh, needling out.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
Grelen has two tree spades. One can dig a 65-inch ball; the other a 90-inch ball. The machines make it possible to plant trees 30 and 40 feet high.