

Nobody Bats a 1,000, but We're Working to Improve Our Average

By Whitney Rideout

Babe Ruth was the greatest slugger in the history of major league baseball – his records have stood for generations – and yet he missed more than three of every 10 pitches that came his way. Brooks Tree Farm, Inc. (Brooks) threw us their best pitch. Truth be told, it went right by all the knowledge gathered to date through the Climate Friendly Nurseries Project (CFNP) into the mitt – even though the project swung as hard as it could. It's not a loss when you swing and miss if you learn something from it, and we most definitely did.

This case study outlines Brooks' 2011 efforts to identify ways to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. It demonstrates Oregon nursery industry commitment toward sustainable practice implementation, and also reveals the complex labyrinth of programs and lack of information, which at times, serves as a barrier to implementation.



Brooks is a family owned nursery specializing in plants for the Christmas tree, timber, and ornamental nursery trades, as well as plants native to the Pacific Northwest used for habitat restoration. They provide bare root seedlings, transplants, plugs and grafting stock from two Willamette Valley, Ore. locations. Their full annual production of seedlings is 6-8 million trees with 4-6 million plants sold each year.

Kathy LeCompte, co-owner of Brooks and former Oregon Association of Nurseries president, has taken steps over the years to make her farm more sustainable. She has installed variable speed drives, efficient sprinklers and gaskets, and efficient greenhouses, but she wanted to implement another practice to assist the CFNP in its goal to identify practical ways to reduce GHG emissions.

Kathy investigated many options listed as Best Management Practices (BMPs) on the CFNP website (www.climatefriendlynurseries.org) including lighting upgrades, installing infrared polyethylene, and replacing condensing units in their cold storage rooms. [LeCompte] "Lighting retrofits didn't provide the ROI we needed since we don't use a lot of lighting. Infrared polyethylene would have forced us to use more energy in total because the crops we grow don't need a lot of additional winter heat but would have needed a lot of extra ventilation in the summers. And replacing the condensing units proved very expensive (\$20,000 to \$35,000 each), and the payback was not clear since the efficiency savings hasn't been proved consistently to date." While most BMPs did not pan out for Brooks, LeCompte identified a greenhouse efficiency item with a reasonable payback period, an attractive incentive, and sufficient benefit to her operation to justify the cost and time of the project: old fans in their greenhouses were replaced with fans with proven energy efficiency benefits.

[LeCompte] "Information about incentives and rebates is fragmented, and a lot of the new efficient equipment hasn't been evaluated for true cost savings. Small businesses with limited staff and peak season times don't have the bandwidth to address the maze of information to identify practices that benefit their operation. As an industry, we need to create better tools and resources to help evaluate sustainable practices."

Oregon nurseries are tremendously varied in terms of the product they grow and how their plants are produced, sold and shipped. Initial BMPs published in 2010 are not yet comprehensive enough to work for every type of nursery operation. On top of that, the complexity of resources and programs and the lack of equipment efficiency data make ROI analyses a challenge. As Babe Ruth said, “Don’t let the fear of striking out hold you back.” CFNP concludes in 2013, and the goal is to provide more tested, effective, and actionable best practices to the industry.

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-Babe Ruth