



Plants West Inc.

Founded: 1995 by Alicia Cruz-Bernstein

PLANTS WEST INC. may have a small footprint, but casts a bigger shadow than one might expect.

The nursery covers 13 acres and has just three full-time employees. However, the nursery’s typical availability list exceeds 20 pages, putting to rest any notion that this is a small specialty grower.

Customers from the East Coast to the Midwest, and down into California, can choose from a deep variety of conifers, deciduous trees, shrubs, topiaries and much more.

“My passion with plants is to have the extensive list, so people can purchase several varieties and not have to go with five different nurseries to bring in what they need for the season,” owner and general manager Alicia Cruz-Bernstein said.

Customers include re-wholesalers, large scale garden centers and larger landscapers who buy finished material, as well as growers buying liners. They can choose from #1 containers and up, as well as B&B material.

What enables the small nursery to offer such variety is that it operates as propagator, grower and broker, always keeping watch on the quality of all plants sold, whether they are self-grown or brokered.

“Unlike other plant brokers, we bring everything into this nursery to guarantee quality control,” Alicia said. “That’s a different approach from a broker that is out of state and truly doesn’t handle the plants.”

This results in the near-constant movement of plant material through the site dur-

ing the busiest times of the year.

“She sells like a nursery that is 10 times her size,” said Alicia’s husband, Adam Bernstein.

All of the material sold by Plants West Inc. comes from Oregon’s Willamette Valley, where growing conditions are prime.

“Having a nursery in Oregon is so spectacular,” Alicia said. “Our season is long. The weather is so phenomenal for growing plants. We can grow a bigger, better plant cheaper than on the East Coast, even with freight.”

But for Alicia, the biggest keys to her

success include keeping a watch on quality, and always providing good communication to the customer.

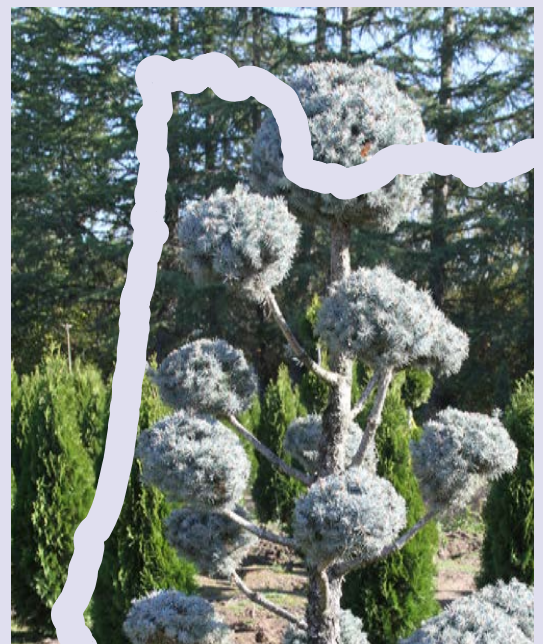
“A lot of my success has been exceeding expectations to my customers for quality and service,” she said. “We grade generously on our plants and size. We want to make sure they’re happy when they open the doors of the truck.”

Growing a business

Although she has worked in the nursery industry for close to three decades, Alicia’s entry into the industry was unplanned.

- **ABOUT:** Broker-grower of ornamentals, conifers, topiaries, evergreen shrubs and deciduous plants.
- **PRINCIPALS:** Alicia and Adam Cruz-Bernstein
- **EMPLOYEES:** 3 full-time, with 2 additional added in the spring.
- **CONTACT:**
 - 📍 27094 S. Bolland Road Canby, OR 97013-8103
 - 📞 503-266-3912
 - ✉ alicia@plantswestoregon.com
- **ONLINE:** www.plantswestoregon.com
- **TRADE SHOWS:** MANTS
- **LISTINGS:**

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Owner and founder Alicia Cruz-Bernstein (second from left) keeps a small crew busy at Plants West Inc., covering several office functions while moving self-grown as well as brokered material out to customers. Pictured with her are (from left) Antonio Valenzuela, Martin Santos, and Jose Valenzuela.

She started after graduating from Sonoma State University (located near Santa Rosa, California, north of the Bay Area) with a business degree in 1982. She took a job with Santa Rosa Tropicals, producing tropical plants and ferns and managing a growing facility.

“I fell into the business in California and really liked the people in the industry,” she said. “I grew to really like plants. It’s one of those tangents in life that really worked out in my favor.”

Alicia found the industry to be very supportive of a newcomer. “I’ve been blessed with a lot of customers or vendors who have given me information on what to do,” she said.

In 1989, Alicia made a move to Oregon’s Willamette Valley, taking a job with Monrovia at their facility in Dayton. She worked for the company in field production for one year, then shifted to inside sales and worked there four more years. This experience allowed her to expand the breadth of her skills in both sales and production.

Alicia’s next job was with Teufel Nursery Inc., but by 1995, she wanted to branch out. She started her own plant brokering business and named it Plants West Inc. Her brother came up with the name.

“It did encompass brokering and growing, even though I wasn’t growing at the time,” she said.

The company had no land of its own, and brokered exclusively for one grower. That changed in 1998, Alicia purchased a 13-acre propagation nursery on the south edge of Canby, Oregon, in the northern Willamette Valley.

With the purchase of the land, Plants West Inc. was transformed from a broker to a grower-broker. Alicia implemented her own vision for the property, adding 1.5 acres of container production but leaving the rest in field production.

During the first year in Canby, Alicia added a propagation greenhouse with bottom heat, capable of producing 25,000 to 50,000 cuttings per year for Plants West’s own production needs. She also added five overwintering/shade houses and laid the infrastructure for the container area.



As part of the transition, Alicia hired the employees from the original grower she brokered for after he retired. They were instrumental in getting the growing operation up and running. They still work at the nursery today.

“We’re blessed to have the same core workers,” she said. “It is like family, which really warms my heart. And they are family. One family works for me.”

The long-term hard work and commitment is greatly appreciated by the owners.

“The staff considers her like family and goes above and beyond,” Adam said.

Alicia shares in the hard work, serving as office manager, sales manager and general manager, often working seven days a week. By her husband Adam’s estimate, she is often doing the work of three or four people during the busiest times of the year.

Over the years, the company began brokering for additional growers and now handles material from more than 20 different Oregon growers. Alicia continues to seek out new vendors to work with, thus securing product availability and quality for her customers.

Life on the nursery

In 2011, Adam and Alicia got married after meeting each other on the golf course. “I was lucky to find Adam,” Alicia said. “He’s been a great husband and companion and partner.”

Adam owned restaurants in the Eugene, Oregon area, which is 90 minutes away by car. The couple didn’t want a long-distance relationship, and decided one of them should retire. Adam decided to retire, and has been happy with his decision. He loves living on the nursery.

“It is a great lifestyle,” he said. “When we talk about retirement, we wonder how

we’re going to find a place as good as here.”

These days, Adam helps out with the business where needed.

“I do the loose ends nobody has time for, especially during the busy season,” he said. “I basically do anything I’m asked as well as some minor equipment maintenance and scheduling.”

When she entered the industry, Alicia had no previous interest in plants. Working with trees and shrubs gave her that passion. Although she grows and sells a wide variety of them, she has favorites. First and foremost is Hinoki cypress for its variety of colors and textures. She also likes hydrangeas, topiaries and “most things that flower,” she said.

In business for 23 years now with Plants West Inc., Alicia has remained busy. She feels content with the business she has created together with her team, and hopes to continue for many years to come.

“Looking forward, I see the nursery staying the same size as now but increasing the varieties of plants we grow,” she said. “We will certainly keep the plants that are consistent sellers for us like cherry laurels, arbs, boxwoods and Japanese maples. I’d like to explore some newer varieties too.”

The constant introduction of new plants helps Alicia hooked on growing.

“That’s another exciting feature of our industry,” she said. “New and interesting plant varieties are always becoming available and redefining our industry’s future.”

Alicia finds the size of the business manageable; she is able to operate it efficiently. And she loves what she does, as busy as it sometimes can be.

“I wanted a fulfilled life and not just work,” she said. “I’ve lived a really lucky life, and I’ve worked hard. I think good things happen to people who work hard.” ©