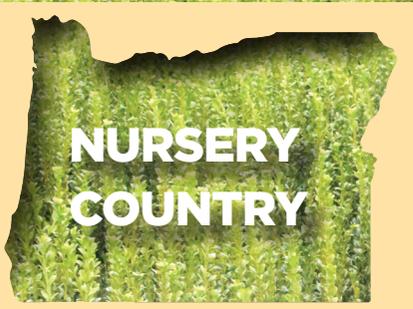




Alfredo and Maria G. Fernandez own AF Nursery, based in Woodburn, Oregon, encompassing 150 acres of fields between four farms. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL



## NURSERY COUNTRY

**FOUNDED**  
2011

**OWNERS**

Alfredo and Maria Fernandez

**KNOWN FOR**

Conifers, maples, skip laurels and grafted liners

**CONTACT**

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31 listings

# AF Nursery

BY EMILY LINDBLOM

**A**S HE PASSES BY HIS ROWS and rows of conifers, maples, skip laurels and grafted liners, Alfredo Fernandez reflects on what has led to his success.

“I feel like I started at the right time and had good luck,” he said. “I’m pretty happy with what I’m doing.”

Alfredo and Maria G. Fernandez own **AF Nursery**, based in Woodburn, Oregon, encompassing 150 acres of fields between four farms.

Alfredo Fernandez estimated they sell about 100,000 plants per year, both finished plants and tree starts used for grafting.

“Most of the nurseries sell finished plants to re-wholesalers, but I sell to other growers too,” Alfredo Fernandez said. “I sell liners and starts to local guys around here, including **Woodburn Nursery and Azaleas**, and **A&R Spada Farms**.” AF Nursery’s

clients also include **Bountiful Farms**, **Willamette Tree** and **KG Farms**.

He said about 40% of what AF Nursery sells stays in Oregon, about 20% goes to other places on the West Coast, and the other 40% gets shipped to the East Coast, including New York and New Jersey.

As Maria Fernandez runs the loader area to prepare a shipment of Japanese maples, Alfredo Fernandez points out the first greenhouse the couple started with in 2011 at the Woodburn farm. Now, that location has 12 greenhouses, and another location in Salem has 10 more, with two currently being built to add to the list.

At the 80-acre Salem location, the main priority is growing maples in the greenhouses, and then a mix of different trees and shrubs in the ground.

The plants there spend about a year or



About 40% of what AF Nursery sells stays in Oregon, about 20% goes to other places on the West Coast, and the other 40% gets shipped to the East Coast, including New York and New Jersey. PHOTO COURTESY AF NURSERY

two in the greenhouses before they are big enough to be moved to the fields. Some of the greenhouses are extra-long, stretching 585 feet.

Alfredo Fernandez said Oregon is a great place to operate a nursery.

“It’s because of the climate and the good soil that we have here in the Willamette Valley,” he said. “We have good water and the spring season is long, so we have good moisture in the soil, making it easy to dig.”

Maria Fernandez said she loves spending her days outdoors.

“I enjoy working outside,” Maria Fernandez said. “The time flies outside, even when it’s raining. I love nature.”

Her main job at the nursery is book-keeping, shipping and watering the plants at the main location in Woodburn.

After Alfredo Fernandez interacts with the customers as a salesperson, Maria Fernandez coordinates with him about when to ship each order.

“The main thing for me is to (get) the exact right order on the right truck to the destination, and the paperwork,” Maria Fernandez said.

She also oversees the scheduling of the automated irrigation systems so the fields will be watered after the employees leave.

“I have to pay attention (to) where they’re working, so I set my clock all day so I don’t have to bother them with the water,” Maria Fernandez said. “Everyday when they leave, I have to program whatever I need to water.”

She attributes the nursery’s success to hard work.

“Alfredo is a really smart person and knows how to manage people,” she said. “That, and the hard work we do — that’s the key.”

#### Starting out on their own

The Fernandezes both previously worked at **J&S Farms & Nursery LLC** in Gervais, Oregon. Alfredo Fernandez got

his start in the industry there in 1998. He said he contributes his success today partially to what he learned while working at J&S.

“I think that is what really helped me, the experience of working for someone else,” he said. “That was one of the keys for sure.”

He worked his way up through different positions at J&S and became a manager.

“Since I was little, I knew I wanted to have my own business when I grew up,” he said. Working with J&S as a manager gave him the experience he needed. “I was running the whole nursery, so that allowed me to learn a lot.”

Maria and Alfredo Fernandez met and eventually got married. Less than a year later, Maria joined Alfredo to work at J&S, where they both stayed for about seven years.

“We decided not to have kids at that time so we could save some money to focus on the future, and to start

## AF Nursery

a little business,” Maria Fernandez said. The two now have four kids — two boys and two girls, all between the ages of 6 and 13.

After years of saving up, they bought the Woodburn farm in 2010. They continued to work at J&S Farms for a while in the beginning, coming to the Woodburn farm after work and on weekends.

“Sometimes we would stay until 12 a.m. or 1 a.m.,” Maria Fernandez said. “We started from nothing, so we were the only employees and we had to do everything on our own.”

He added that they started at the right time, just after the Great Recession.

“Back in 2008 to 2010, the industry really got hit with the recession,” he said. “A lot of people were just scared of what happened, and I came with that experience in the industry at the right time.”

They hired their first worker in 2012.



At the 80-acre Salem location, the main priority is growing maples in the greenhouses. PHOTO COURTESY AF NURSERY

AF Nursery began by growing hedges, particularly emerald green arborvitae and laurels. They expanded over the years to include Japanese maples and boxwoods.

“I don’t do a lot of variety, but I try to have good quality plants, so that’s what I concentrate on,” Alfredo Fernandez said.

In 2015, AF Nursery expanded by purchasing a farm located in Gervais. They bought the Salem location in 2019,

and then another 45-acre farm next to their Woodburn farm in 2022. They employ 26 staff members across all four farms in a year-round operation.

Alfredo Fernandez said so far the nursery hasn’t faced too many issues, but he’s keeping up with the latest technology and planning for more automation in the future.

“I think we just have to do more automation because the labor is going

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to (become) harder and harder,” he said. “There’s not much we can do, so I think we just have to do more automation.”

As of now, AF Nursery has 140 acres of ball and burlap (B&B) and 10 acres of containers. The Fernandezes want to expand on that.

**Looking ahead**

“My goal for the future is to get out of the B&B, which is more heavy work,” Alfredo Fernandez said. “We’re trying to do more to move toward other work that’s not too hard on people — to move out of B&B and do more pot-in-pot. What I want to do in the future is turn all those 150 acres ... into containers.”

He said he’s inspired by Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas, which has an extensive pot-in-pot system. The trees and shrubs are kept in transportable containers that are placed inside stationary containers at specific spots in the ground.

AF Nursery has already started planting with GPS coordinates to keep track of where each plant is located. This way, they will be able to eventually use automated pruning devices to trim the plants without much labor.

“I’m trying to do whatever I can afford to do for more automation,” Alfredo Fernandez said. “I’m that type of guy who likes to keep up with technology. I really like to keep it upgraded.

“When I started (AF Nursery) that was one of the things I knew was going to become big, we needed to do anything we could for automation to replace labor.”

He and Maria Fernandez started toward this goal with irrigation. AF Nursery has an entirely automatic watering system based on a timer.

“Water is one of the supplies we use six months of the year,” Alfredo Fernandez said. “If you don’t do automation, you’re going to have labor those

whole six months.”

Maria Fernandez said the main goal is to keep growing, improving, and making the work easier for the employees so they can do more with less work.

“We have to get involved with more machinery that can help us grow,” she said.

She added that she enjoys what she does at AF Nursery and she’s proud of what she and Alfredo Fernandez have done.

“I’m hoping that one of our kids in the future would like to go into the industry so the nursery can stay on the map for years to come,” she said. ☺

*Emily Lindblom is an Oregon-based freelance journalist covering business, environmental and agricultural news. She has a background in community reporting and a master’s degree in multimedia journalism. Visit her website at [EmilyLindblom.com](http://EmilyLindblom.com) or reach her at [Emily@EmilyLindblom.com](mailto:Emily@EmilyLindblom.com).*

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