



Shine a little light- and watch your reputation grow

How one nursery gets its fair share of publicity

The Landscape Contractor
May 1999
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Rich's Foxwillow Pines Nursery is a media darling. The nursery has been written up in (or has written for) numerous local publications. How do they get so much press? Two words: self-promotion.

Self-promotion is a simple enough concept: blow your own horn. But a few people, P.T. Barnum, for instance, can take self-promotion to an art form. Richard and Susan Eyre have mastered that art and that talent has put their Woodstock-based nursery, Rich's Foxwillow Pines, on the pages of an impressive number of publications. How do they get so much publicity, and how can small-to mid-size green industry firm owners get more "ink?"

Rich's Foxwillow Pines Nursery specializes in dwarf conifers (with many rare cultivars) and other dwarf plants. Rich and Susan are the "tag team" that runs the nursery and does the promotion. Additionally, both give lectures, slide shows, and grafting demonstrations to horticulture classes, professional organizations, plant societies and garden clubs. On a basic level, these two attributes- having a unique product and being considered an expert on this group of plants- have made them "famous."

Rich, Susan and Rich's mother Margaret started the nursery in the spring of 1988. Today, it features more than 2,000 cultivars of conifers and 1,000 woodies. In addition, the nursery offers more than 300 types of hostas, 100 cultivars of dwarf daylilies and more than 100 cultivars of dwarf iris, as well as other plants.

Although it is not a huge nursery (only six acres in size), it has received some impressive press. It has been featured in *Chicagoland Gardening* magazine, the March 29, 1998, Home and Garden section of the *Chicago Tribune*, the quarterly *Chicago Home and Garden* magazine, and *Midwest Living*. The Eyres also authored articles for the Jan. 15, 1999 issue of *American Nurseryman* and the 1999 winter edition of *The Weedpatch Gazette*, a Chicago-area gardening quarterly. Rich and the nursery were also featured on the national TV show "Victory Garden" in August 1997. The nursery has also been an annual exhibitor at the perennially well-attended *Chicago Flower and Garden Show* held in March, the *Mid America Horticultural Trade Show* held in January, and the *Festival of Flowers and Homes* in February at the Rosemont Convention Center. The nursery also boasts its own website that includes links to its products and a map to its site.

Micro niche and credibility

When asked about their marketing skills, both Rich and Susan agree that their unusual products- dwarf conifers- speak volumes themselves. "Number one is having a unique product that people want." Susan says.

"I call it a micro niche," adds Rich. This is the result of Eyre turning his hobby of dwarf conifer collecting, which he took up in the 1970's, into a profession in 1988.

In addition, both Rich and Susan are gregarious and share a passion for dwarf plants. "Part of the uniqueness of the business is the service that is provided. We help customers select the right tree for the right space. Our goal is to make the trees and the customer happy," Rich says. Educating customers is key. They gave about 50 presentations last year. Rich was one of three speakers on conifers at ILCA's 1998 Winter Seminar.

"We also built credibility by working with the experts and mentoring with the older people. They empower you to pass on the knowledge," Rich says. His mentors include Chub Harper, past president of the American Conifer Society, collector and former head of maintenance at the John Deere Corp. headquarters in Moline; Joe Stupka, a master grafter and propagator from Pennsylvania; and Edward Hasselkus, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Throughout their careers, both Rich and Susan have done extensive research on dwarf conifers and horticulture. In fact, Rich says he would like to retire someday to devote himself to researching conifers. It is his passion for the plants, rather than a materialistic push to sell them, that comes through in his lectures and interviews he adds. "We believe in what we are doing. We speak in a pure manner not just materialistically. We can speak soulfully." The Eyres also endorse joining horticulture societies and associations. They belong to and support the American Conifer Society; in 19996, they hosted the society's national meeting.

It is the combination of selling and being expert on a unique product, dwarf conifers, that has given the Eyres their notoriety and credibility. But the good press is also the result of old-fashioned hard work. Rich and Susan are constantly sharing their philosophies with customers (which are landscape contractors and retail buyers). They tell their story to industry professionals. They tell media. Eventually, word spreads. "After 10 years of promoting ourselves, and in 1988 making 50 presentations either here at the nursery or elsewhere, you then have other people promoting and talking about you," Susan says. The Eyres are also media savvy. They routinely invite local newspaper reporters to any event they host at the nursery. They also send out press releases to promote their lectures or the shows in which they will be exhibiting.

"And a lot of it is luck," notes Susan. "We wrote an article for *American Nurseryman*, and that just happened to be the issue that they were giving away at Mid-Am. That's luck. They asked us to do the article based on the talk that Rich gave at ILCA's Winter Seminar." Their luck and self-promotion has paid off. Susan notes that their business has doubled every year for the past ten years.

Getting the word (and plants) out

Being exhibitors at the *Chicago Flower and Garden Show*, as well as Mid-Am, the *Festival of Flowers and Homes* and the annual *Woodstock Garden Walk* boosts the nursery's profile. "The fact that not many people know our product prompts us to go to the *Chicago Flower and Garden Show* or give plants to the *Chicago Botanic Garden*, the *Morton Arboretum*, the *Quad Cities Botanic Garden*, and the *University of Wisconsin Garden*," Susan says.

They donate many dwarf conifers to various organizations, an act they have dubbed "philplanthropy." By donating conifers, the Eyres put their unusual cultivars on display and serve their community simultaneously. Last fall, they worked with the *Chicago Park District* to install a conifer and specimen plant collection at the entrance of the *Lincoln Park Conservatory*. The couple also has contributed plants to the *Chub Harper Collection* at *Bickelhaupt Arboretum* in Clinton, Iowa, the *Hoofed Animal Society World Headquarters*, *Turning Points* (a battered women's shelter), the *Woodstock Opera House*, *Valley High Nursing Home* and the *Betty Brown Garden* at the *Chicago Botanic Garden* in Glencoe. In addition to "philplanthropy," the Eyres also donate money and time to the *Heifer Project International* (HPI). All proceeds from the nursery's plant sales at the 1999 *Chicago Flower and Garden Show* went toward HPI fundraising. This international organization provides food and income producing animals and training to more than one million impoverished families across the globe. Under HPI, farmers are given animals to help solve hunger and nutrition problems. The farmers are then asked to "pass on the gift" of the animals first female offspring to another deserving family. The Eyres state that they raised \$30,000 for HPI in 1998. They are planning an HPI fundraiser Sept. 12 at *Lincoln Park Conservatory*.

Additionally, the nursery's catalog does more than just catalog plant material. There is an introduction describing the firm's history, its site, philosophy, philanthropy and a calendar of show and educational events. It also directs readers to the firm's website (www.richsfoxwillowpines.com), has a photo contest promotion, explains evergreen planting and pruning techniques and recommends books on conifers.

You can, too

How can other green industry professionals better promote their company? The key is being an expert and making yourself available to the media, according to Lenore Dupuis Public Relations, Northbrook, and ILCA's public relations consultant since 1991, "Speaking engagements are tremendous, and so is sending short press releases to promote them," Dupuis says. "Having an expertise or a niche can really pay off."