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Fifty Years of Rootstock - Harry Burton

You don't always know what you've got till it's gone. How true.

John Traas has retired after many years of running Traas Nursery in Langley, BC, and, unfortunately, the nursery will not continue to operate. The nursery was started by John's father in the late 1950s. John starting working there at age 12.

John took over the business from his father in 1975, although his father stayed close to the business after retirement. John's father passed away just before Christmas 2006 at age 93, having still had a presence in the nursery until age 92. So in total, John worked 45 years with his father.

You might say that losing a nursery is not serious because there are lots of nurseries everywhere in Canada, but Traas Nursery was unique and no one else in Canada comes close to filling their niche.

Traas Nursery was the only grower in Canada producing rootstock for the fruit industry. In total they grow 11 varieties of apple rootstock, 1 cherry rootstock and 2 plum rootstock. The nursery sold about 750,000 rootstock per year. Almost every fruit tree grafted in Canada is grown on Traas rootstock. They will be greatly missed.

What We'll Miss

The loss is immense, for a variety of reasons:

- a) John, has almost 50 years of experience growing a very large range of rootstock, with no one to pass this knowledge on to;
- b) The nursery was full of the stooling beds which produce these rootstocks, so the source of the rootstock is lost;
- c) the equipment, the storage sheds, the setup is lost forever;
- d) the greatest loss, is that there is no next generation taking over this skill.

What Made It A Tough Enterprise

The challenges that have faced John in running Traas Nursery are many:

- a) income only comes in during a short period of time every year.
- b) good farm labour (dependable and willing to learn) is almost impossible to find;
- c) weather has been very uncooperative, especially in the spring when rootstock needs to be dug up;
- d) the declining fruit industry has had a negative effect on the need for rootstock and rootstock demand has been hard to predict, so some years excess rootstock has had to be burned;
- e) there was no one interested in continuing the business;
- f) with the death of John's father, the settling of the estate meant the loss of some of the nursery land and buildings.

A Fabulous History

Despite all this, what a truly fabulous history Traas Nursery has established over 48 years. John's father was a remarkable person. From an early age, he had worked in his father's orchard in Holland and it was his innate love of plants, which led him to further horticultural study. After a flood destroyed his orchards in Holland in 1953, he decided not to continue in Holland, so with his wife and six children, he emigrated to Canada.

Still interested in the fruit business, he working in orchards and packing houses in the Okanagan. When pondering setting up his own orchard, he realized there was no supply of good rootstock in Canada or the US and he saw his niche.

The rootstock business was familiar to him, as he had been an agricultural extension agent in Holland. He also realized that the Langley area with its mild winters would be much better for growing rootstock than the Okanagan.

So in the late 1950s, he acquired land in Langley. After obtaining the rootstock variety from Europe, he proceeded to propagate it at Traas Nursery. Times were difficult at the beginning and for the first three years, they sold little and burned most of their product to get rid of it.

Finally after three years, they sold some M111 to the Okanagan, and word of their rootstock spread. They were launched. Through hard work and determination, Mr Traas senior broke new ground in the fruit industry by propagating dwarfing rootstock.

For many years he was a member of the International Plant Propagators Society, from which he derived much help and pleasure. In 1982, the Canadian Society for Horticulture Science recognized Traas senior's exceptional service to the tree-fruit industry of Canada.

So now, John is also leaving this very difficult and challenging job. He has sure done his share of the work and performed a great service to the fruit industry. I hope he gets time to enjoy some of the fruits of his labour.

John produced great rootstock and had incredible varieties. He sold my rootstock of choice, Alnarp 2 and M111. I can't imagine where we are going to get our rootstock next year.

Harry Burton runs Apple Luscious Organic Orchard on Salt Spring Island which grows 350 varieties of apples. He is a key part of the Salt Spring Apple Festival (9th Annual on September 30), listed by Tourism Canada as one of the top 10 food and wine festivals in the province. Harry occasional transforms into his alter ego Captain Apple. ☺

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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com.

Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>