



## Nurseries *to* Visit *on the* Olympic Peninsula

BY JANINE ANDERSON

The Olympic Peninsula has numerous attractions, and summer is the best time to visit. The million-acre Olympic National Park has miles of wilderness coast, endless trails through scenic wonders, and a majestic rainforest. Among the peninsula's many other treasures are the Victorian seaport of Port Townsend; the ferry crossing the Strait of Juan de Fuca from Port Angeles to Victoria, BC; and Cape Flattery at the northwestern-most point in the continental United States. For gardeners on the go, three specialty nurseries stand out as destinations all on their own. Far Reaches Farm, Chimacum Woods and The Desert Northwest are worth the time and effort to visit—not just for the

amazing plants they offer, but also for the creative individuals who nurture them.

### **Far Reaches Farm**

Located on six bucolic acres just 10 minutes from downtown Port Townsend, Far Reaches Farm isn't really a farm. Opened in 2005 by Kelly Dodson and Sue Milliken, Far Reaches Farm is a regional treasure, as well as a specialty nursery.

*The story of Far Reaches Farm.* Before starting their nursery, Kelly and Sue had already been plant purveyors for decades; Kelly previously owned Reflective Gardens in Poulsbo, Washington, while Sue had a nursery in Vermont. The seeds for their current joint endeavor were



**TOP:** Brazilian native *Alstroemeria isabellana* flowers in July and August. (Photo by Far Reaches Farm)

**INSET:** Sue Milliken and Kelly Dodson of Far Reaches Farm. (Photo by Janine Anderson)

sown in 1997, when they met on a seed-collecting expedition to China.

Both have had lifelong passions for plants. Kelly grew up in Puyallup—where his parents built a greenhouse for his cactus collection when he was just 11 years old—and he majored in horticulture at Washington State University, while Sue earned a biology degree from Middlebury College in Vermont.

Most of the plants Kelly and Sue offer are propagated at the farm. Nothing harmful is employed in plant production. Organic or biological methods are used for insect and disease control. Weeding is done by hand, and hazelnut shells are used for mulching and weed suppression. The nursery's custom potting soil mix contains no peat moss, owing to the unsustainable nature of peat moss harvesting. Slow-release fertilizer is used to minimize nutrient leaching. Kelly and Sue's thoughtful practices are good for the plants, but also for the surrounding ecosystem. A large wetland on the property is home to frogs, salamanders and newts, as well as ducks, herons, songbirds and rails (small, shy wading birds), and Kelly and Sue want to prevent chemicals from reaching the wetland.

The populations of birds and bees have increased since Kelly and Sue opened the nursery: Brewer's blackbirds nest in potted plants, and Anna's hummingbirds spend winter nights in the greenhouse among the most nectar-producing flowers. Killdeer lay eggs on a garden berm just a few feet from the entry drive. These reliable returnees have halted the expansion of an entry garden. Here, a dramatic assemblage of xeric plants, anchored by large boulders and two stately *Yucca rostrata*, is followed by a long strip of uncultivated soil, where the killdeer nest and raise several clutches throughout spring and summer.

*The plants.* Far Reaches Farm offers unusual plants from around the globe that often cannot



be found at conventional retail nurseries. Many of its offerings are grown from seed collected during Kelly and Sue's multiple expeditions to China and the adjacent Sino-Himalaya area. Among the mouth-watering temptations you might encounter on a summer visit are nine varieties of *Agapanthus*; six different types of manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*), including several that can be used as groundcov-

ers; six species of red hot poker (*Kniphofia*); some knockout Peruvian lilies (*Alstroemeria*); various types of giant Himalayan lily (*Cardiocrinum*); and 30-some varieties of *Crocasmia*. Many of the plants offered for sale are displayed in the nursery's shade house or in one of its jaw-dropping borders. Be forewarned that visiting Far Reaches Farm can be a little heart wrenching because many of the most sought-after plants sell out soon after they become available.

*The details.* Far Reaches Farm sells plants via its online catalog. Plants are also available at the nursery, which is open from spring into fall—from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Thursday through Saturday. Plants ordered online can be picked up year-round by appointment between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. on weekdays. More information, including dates and locations of off-site plant sales, can be found on the nursery's website, [farreachesfarm.com](http://farreachesfarm.com).

### Chimacum Woods

If you're heading west to the Olympic Peninsula from the Kingston or Bainbridge Island ferries, take a left, just a few miles after crossing the Hood Canal Bridge, to wend your way to rhododendron nursery Chimacum Woods. Shrouded in a forest setting about four miles south of State Route 104, the nine-acre nursery is owned by Bob Zimmermann and Beth Orling.

*The story of Chimacum Woods.* The nursery was started by Bob in 1976, and Beth joined the business after their marriage in 2001. Bob and

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Nesting killdeer (here, an adult is sheltering four chicks) prevent expansion of entry garden at Far Reaches Farm.  
(Photo by David Gluckman)



Beth met in grade school and stayed in touch through college, then lost contact for 38 years. Neither had strong horticultural roots; Bob was an English major in college, while Beth majored in German.

When Bob bought his first house during graduate school, he also acquired his first rhody, (a hybrid named ‘Elizabeth’) and recalled that his father had grown rhododendrons in New Jersey. After that, he had purchased a “Sunset” book on rhododendrons, the last chapter of which was on propagation. Bob took a cutting from a rhododendron growing at the local library, turned a pie tin upside down over the pilot light on his gas stove, and put the cutting in a pot covered with a plastic bag. (The book said that bottom heat and high humidity were recommended for propagating rhodies.) He was careful to move the pot every time he used the stove. The cutting rooted (it turned out to be *Rhododendron* ‘Fragrantissimum’), and Bob’s passion for the genus was ignited.

Bob says his formal education in horticulture was by trial and error in the school of hard knocks—with an emphasis on error, reportedly having made every mistake in the book. He



says he’s still learning and has two large piles of dumped substrate from dead plants at the nursery to prove it.

The turning point for Chimacum Woods was in 1982, when China eased travel restrictions and Bob began to get wild-collected rhododendron seed. Since then, Chimacum Woods has focused

**TOP:** The long, narrow, lanceolate leaves and pink-white flowers of *Rhododendron makinoi*—for sale at Chimacum Woods. (Photo by Steve Law/Wikimedia Commons)

**CENTER:** Beth Orling and Bob Zimmermann of Chimacum Woods with *Rhododendron luteum*, which was grown from wild-collected seed from Turkey. (Photo by Chimacum Woods)

**BOTTOM:** Fragrant white flowers of summer-flowering *Rhododendron auriculatum* at Chimacum Woods. (Photo by Chimacum Woods)



almost exclusively on species plants grown from seed, either wild collected or carefully hand pollinated. From the seed cups, the plants go into two-inch bands, then four-inch pots, then one-gallon containers—and finally into two-gallon containers to grow out their roots for sale the following year. The entire process takes five to six years. For Bob and Beth, species rhododendrons are about foliage, and flowers are just a bonus.

Bob has been on numerous seed-hunting expeditions. In 1997, he explored southwest Tibet with rhododendron specialist Kenneth Cox of Glendoick Gardens in Perth, Scotland. They were the first westerners to visit the area in 50 years and brought back *Rhododendron lanatoides*, a species new to cultivation in the West. Subsequent trips included ones to Yunnan Province in 2000 and 2001, and another to Sichuan Province in 2009. He also led his own trips in 2013 and 2015. Bob says the trips, for him, are about one-third botanical, one-third cultural (they are always based in tribal areas), one-third political (he was arrested in Tibet), and one-third spiritual. (Because his days start at 6 a.m. and end at midnight, he claims there are enough hours in one day for an extra third!) On his best day, Bob saw 43 different species of

rhododendrons. His longest hike, in 2000, was 20 miles in one day, with 6500 feet of elevation change; the second longest was in 2015, with 16 miles and 5200 feet of elevation change.

*The plants.* You can purchase rhododendrons at Chimacum Woods, and you can also stroll paths through an extensive display garden. In summer, the garden is a study in what species rhododendrons look like year round—with striking leaves that don't need flowers to be appealing and elegant shapes that transcend the stereotypical rounded balls of many plants in the trade—not to mention the unattractive, leggy shapes that many rhodys assume once they have outgrown their sites.

Chimacum Woods is a working garden and experimentation is ongoing. Rhododendrons can be found in hanging baskets. (Some of them, after all, are epiphytes.) There are also some species that bloom in July, August or September. Most of these have white flowers, and all are fragrant. *Rhododendron auriculatum* is a good example. Bob and Beth are always in propagation mode—growing seeds, transplanting, making cuttings, etc.—and they are enthusiastic about sharing their knowledge.

*The details.* Visitors to Chimacum Woods are always welcome by appointment. Along with extensive plant descriptions and photos, the

**TOP:** Hoophouse at The Desert Northwest contains a treasure trove of exotic species. (Photo by The Desert Northwest)

**INSET:** Ian Barclay of The Desert Northwest in Sequim. (Photo by The Desert Northwest)

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Winter flowers of *Grevillea victoriae* 'Murray Valley Queen'. (Photo by Janine Anderson)



nursery's website ([chimacumwoods.com](http://chimacumwoods.com)) lists weekends when the nursery is open to the public; Puget Sound garden centers that carry its plants; and also dates and locations of local plant sales, where plants from the nursery are featured.

### The Desert Northwest

Located in Sequim, Washington—just south of Highway 101—The Desert Northwest is owned by Ian Barclay and specializes in drought-tolerant and rare plants.

*The story of The Desert Northwest.* Ian's interest in plants developed while in high school in Olympia, Washington. He joined the school's horticulture club and quickly filled a hobby greenhouse with rare and unusual plants collected at specialty nurseries. As a senior, Ian took horticulture as an elective, but most of his learning was hands-on at home.

Ian entered Washington State University as a music major but ended up with a degree in ornamental horticulture. Despite his credentials, most of what he knows came about through trial and error and experimentation. Because he experimented at his parents' property while in college, he developed an interest in plants that would require very little care during the months that he was away. What survived were generally plants that were watered only once after planting. *Eucalyptus* and other Australian plants thrived. At one time, Ian had over 100 species of *Eucalyptus*. About 20 to 25 of these survived the hard winters of 2008 to 2010.

Ian still likes *Eucalyptus*, although he no longer offers many for sale. He's partial to plants from Australia, New Zealand, Chile, South Africa, California, the American Southwest, the Mediterranean region and, to some extent,

Mexico. He's not particularly smitten with thirsty Asiatic flora, but—of course—there are exceptions. His favorite genera include *Grevillea*, *Eucalyptus*, *Olearia*, *Leptospermum*, *Opuntia*, *Agave*, *Arctostaphylos*, *Quercus* (especially the evergreen oaks), *Podocarpus* and *Delosperma*. Ian went through a bamboo phase and, at one point, had about 100 different kinds of bamboo. He is now down to 60 or so and has decided to continue to maintain them only as a hobby because they don't fit the water-wise theme of the nursery.

*The plants.* The Desert Northwest sells plants from each of Ian's favorite genera. For example, there's New Zealand native *Olearia ilicifolia*, which has dark stems and crinkly, gray, holly-like leaves; the Australian native *Leptospermum lanigerum*, which has small leaves that are aromatic when bruised; and at least seven varieties of *Grevillea victoriae* (royal grevillea)—including 'Murray Valley Queen', which, at four-by-four feet, is somewhat more compact than the straight species. Most of Ian's plants are available by mail order. Plants in pots larger than one gallon must be picked up at the nursery. Ian also delivers plants throughout the region for a fee and/or minimum order.

*The details.* Information about dates the nursery is open for visitors, along with plant sales in which Ian is participating, can be found on Ian's blog ([desertnw.wordpress.com](http://desertnw.wordpress.com)).

### Conclusion

Far Reaches Farm, Chimacum Woods and The Desert Northwest are three fascinating destinations for gardeners visiting the Olympic Peninsula during the summer. Each nursery offers unique and exotic plants from around the globe. The vast knowledge of their impassioned creators is shared enthusiastically with visitors, and you will return home all the richer for having visited them. ∞

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JANINE ANDERSON, CPH, is an award-winning Pacific Northwest-based landscape designer ([www.anderson-design.net](http://www.anderson-design.net)), garden writer, speaker, and member of the "Bulletin" Editorial Board.