

RIGHT IN LINE

RENNERWOOD CAN'T KEEP UP WITH THE DEMAND FOR ITS QUALITY LINERS



"The Texas ladies" — Shara Gose, Susan Smith and Laura Leydens (left to right) — plan to expand the nursery without losing sight of quality.



Highbeam overcup oaks are produced in Grower containers to keep their root systems cooler.



Smaller liners account for half of Rennerwood's sales, but the company is seeing a shift toward larger material.



Rennerwood is experimenting with RootSkirts and plants to use them more often on heat-sensitive crops.

Rennerwood

Founded: 1983 by Helen Matthews. Susan Smith became a managing partner in 1988, and Matthews has since retired.

Acres: 175

Location: Tennessee Colony, Texas, in USDA Hardiness Zone 8.

Employees: 54.

Crops: 75 varieties of shade and ornamental tree liners. They're sold as 2½- and 2½-inch pots and 1-, 3- and 5-gallon containers.

Customers: U.S. wholesale nurseries in USDA Hardiness Zones 6-9.

Keys to success: Liners are produced in root-pruning containers, and each plant is hand inspected before it leaves the property.

By Todd Davis

Wire mesh helps pots
Page 24



Perhaps the biggest compliment for Rennerwood is that you don't have to mention the company's name for people to know who you're talking about.

If you're discussing liner producers, all you have to say is, "the Texas ladies," and people know who mean Rennerwood.

The next biggest compliment would be that it's difficult to buy material from this nursery. Rennerwood stays sold out so consistently that in many cases orders have to be placed years in advance.

Owner Susan Smith hopes that 20 new acres in production will help the nursery keep up with demand, but the expansion will not come at the expense of quality.

"If we begin to lose our quality, we'll downsize," Smith said.

After all, producing the best product available is what made Rennerwood what it is today. Helen Matthews founded the company

in 1983. Five years later, Smith joined the company as a partner.

Matthews has since retired and the management team now consists of Smith, propagation manager Laura Leydens, who started with Rennerwood in 1995, and Shara Gose, hired in 2000, who is in charge of 1-, 3- and 5-gallon production.

Good stuff

Rennerwood sells about 3 million liners per year — each of which is hand inspected before it leaves the facility. While this means extra labor, it ensures quality and saves customers' time.

"They know they don't have to go through and cull our products," Smith said. "We only want to ship out the absolute best."

Liners are sold in 2½- and 2½-inch pots, and 1-, 3- and 5-gallon containers. The company ships material primarily to USDA Hardiness Zones 6-9 — roughly from New York to Florida to Texas to Kansas. Rennerwood also sells a limited amount of material to West Coast nurseries.

Gallon material and larger account for roughly half of the company's sales, but Smith sees a shift in the market. Nurseries want larger liners because they know they'll finish faster.

Because of this, Rennerwood is increasing its production of larger material. In fact, the bulk of the 20-acre expansion will be in 3-gallon trees.

"We had enough orders for 3-gallon material that we were forced to expand," Smith said. "The trick will be not to expand too quickly. We're going to hire more managers and more people and, right now, we're doing most of our promotion from within."

The first crops on the new acreage will be planted in spring 2004, and harvest should begin in the fall.

Roots done right

Smith knows that tree liners' most important qualities lie below the soil line. Good roots mean a plant will establish more quickly after transplant and finish faster. This means



Anjelina Madera inspects 2½-inch liners as she pulls an order.



Shara Gose inspects the root system of a 5-gallon 'D.D. Blanchard' magnolia.



Small liners are pulled and prepared over the weekend so they can be shipped via UPS or FedEx on Monday and Tuesday.



Feeder roots can escape Grounder containers, but taproots remain in the pot.



Nyssa sylvatica (front) and *Quercus shumardii* produce dense root systems in 2½-inch root-pruning pots.



T post hooks clipped to container rims help keep the mesh suspended.



Concrete reinforcement mesh keeps gallon containers upright and evenly spaced.

Wire mesh keeps 1-gallon pots upright

Rennerwood nursery has a simple, but effective, way to keep gallon containers upright and evenly spaced. The company buys concrete reinforcement wire mesh (available at construction supply stores) and places the pots in the mesh in every other hole. The mesh is then lifted and held in place a few inches from the lips of the pots with T post fencing hooks.

This has proven to be an excellent method and is easy to install and remove.

increased turns for Rennerwood's clients and, ultimately, more profit.

When Matthews began the nursery, liners were produced in paper "milk cartons," but now all Rennerwood's products are grown in root-pruning containers from RootMaker Products Co.

"We had been using the RootMaker 1-gallon pots for a while, but started using the RootMaker propagation pots in 1988," Smith said. "We went exclusively to RootMaker containers 12 years ago."

RootMaker pots are designed to air-prune roots and promote fibrous root systems. The 2½-inch pots come in 32-count trays and are 4 inches deep. The extra depth helps drainage and keeps the top of the soil drier. The 2½-inch propagation pots come in four-packs and are also 4 inches deep.

The 5-gallon containers are known as Grounders and are designed to be buried into the ground up to the lip — like pot-in-pot production, only without a socket pot. The Grounders contain small holes that allow small feeder roots to escape into native soils, but don't allow taproots out of the pots.

This allows these trees to be insulated from high summer and cold winter temperatures, and for trees to be harvested with little or no shock, Smith said. She believes that the root-pruning containers allow her customers to finish her liners up to a year faster than typical liners.

For 2½- and 2½-inch materials, she said they have advantages over field-grown liners in that they can be transplanted at almost any time of

year with virtually 100-percent survivability.

"With the 3-gallon pots, I really think you can knock at least a year off of the end production," she said. "With the gallons, you might be able to cut off a year."

The latest innovation from RootMaker in use at Rennerwood is RootSkirts — white fabric sleeves that fit over 1- and 3-gallon containers for insulation.

"I've tried them and I like what I see," Smith said. "They keep roots cooler in summer and warmer in winter. I'm going to use more of them, but not exclusively because they're fairly expensive."

She will likely use them on more sensitive crops, such as oaks.

Ship shape

Rennerwood's smaller liners are shipped via UPS or FedEx, while 1-gallon and larger are shipped on tractor-trailers. UPS and FedEx deliveries are made only on Monday or Tuesday to ensure they don't arrive at the customers' sites on weekends.

Employees pull this material on Saturdays and Sundays and prepare and stage them in a shipping barn. They're boxed on Monday and Tuesday. Gallon and larger material is pulled and prepared throughout the week.

The nursery's primary irrigation water comes from a 30-acre lake on the property. The nursery has several deep wells, but this water is high in sodium bicarbonates, so lake water is preferable.

Neither lake nor well water is filtered, but

they're both treated with sulfuric acid to lower pH before they're applied to crops.

Finding the right tree varieties

Rennerwood grows about 75 varieties of shade and ornamental tree liners. Lately, many nurseries with new cultivars are approaching Rennerwood and asking the company to grow their trees. With any new cultivar or species, Rennerwood will trial it, and take liners to trade shows to judge customers' response.

The company exhibits at seven Southeastern trade shows annually.

"If we don't get much response from a new variety, we'll grow them on for a year or so and see if we can develop a market for them," Smith said. "If not, we'll drop them."

Live oaks, willow oaks and Shumard oaks are Rennerwood's biggest sellers, in that order. New cultivars that have created a great deal of interest include clonal oak cultivars from Tree Introductions in Athens, Ga., Wynstar willow oak from Moon's Tree Farm in Loganville, Ga., Cathedral live oak from Shadowlawn Nursery in Penney Farms, Ga., and *Acer rubrum* Summer Red from Head Ornamentals in Seneca, S.C.

Lagerstroemia indica Red Rocket, Pink Velour and Burgundy Cotton from Lacebark Inc. in Stillwater, Okla., also generate much interest.

♦ For more: Rennerwood, 1025 Anderson County Road 2810, Tennessee Colony, TX 75801; (903) 928-2921; fax (903) 928-2161; www.rennerwood.com; RootMaker Products Co., P.O. Box 14553, Huntsville, AL 35815; (256) 882-3199; fax (256) 882-0423; www.rootmaker.com