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Plant Life

Molbak's Main Man

Valerie Easton

JENS MOLBAK NEVER had any intention of going into the family business. He may have potted up mums since age 7, but after high school he was off to Yale, a business career in New York, then back West to Stanford University. His second year into earning an MBA, Jens launched Coinstar, a network of automated coin-counting machines. When he and his wife, Blair, a former New Yorker magazine staffer, decided to grow the business, they moved to the Northwest. Jens took Coinstar public in 1997, then retired a few years later on his 39th birthday.

But Jens never really escaped his upbringing on the family's 40-acre farm and Woodinville nursery. "Mom would tell you I learned the value of a coin from washing all those dirty terra cotta pots for a penny apiece," says Jens, recalling the year he scrubbed 280,000 pots to earn money to visit his grandfather in Denmark.

"Turns out I knew more about the nursery business than I suspected," he says, knowledge he put to good use after the briefest of retirements. By 2002, rapid expansion compounded by the difficult post-9/11 retail climate plunged Molbak's into financial trouble. Jens wasn't comfortable sitting on the sidelines while his parents lost their life's work. He jumped in to see how he could help and ended up buying the business from his folks.

All this was behind the scenes of a bustling Molbak's in Woodinville, and customers were amazed by the precipitous closing of branches at the Pike Place Market and University Village. Then Jens' ambitious hope to turn the family farm into a horticultural and environmental center, with no less than England's Wisley Garden as a model, hit the news. "Now that idea is dead and gone," says Jens, who failed to get zoning regulations changed to accommodate his plan.

But that's about the only one of his ideas Jens isn't actively pursuing, or at least mulling over. He's opened a stylish café with a Richard Hartlage-designed garden. "This represents a far different style of gardening," says Jens. "It's densely planted, low-maintenance and high-impact." The modern garden is a sign of changes to come for this destination nursery that celebrated its 50th anniversary last month.



Jens has been working on his learning curve, traveling with Blair to visit gardens and nurseries around the country, in England and Europe. "I actually found out I do like the nursery business," he says, sounding slightly surprised. "I'm most intrigued with design, but I'm getting into the botanical part of it, too."

The couple came home inspired by the Chelsea show and the concept of outdoor



JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

At 44, Jens Molbak now owns the nursery his parents started 50 years ago. With plans to take Molbak's forward into the next 50 years, he is bringing in more perennials and grasses, and supervising a redesign that will make the nursery easier to navigate.



Now In Bloom

A petite new Japanese white pine has bursts of long, blue-green needles gilded in gold. Appropriately named *Pinus parviflora* 'Goldilocks,' this little beauty lights up the garden on dark winter days. Its needles are especially bright at the tips, giving it an appealing frosted appearance. 'Goldilocks' grows slowly to 5 to 8 feet, so is compact enough to star in a container or blend into a border.

ILLUSTRATED BY JULIE NOTARIANNI

rooms, and set out to transform their garden at home. They hired landscape architect Bob Swain to integrate the architecture of the house with the garden, and Hartlage to design the plantings. "Gardening has soul-feeding benefits; it actually matters," says Jens. His family's own soul feeding includes a big vegetable garden, a water feature and enough loops and paths for three kids and the dog to play.

Jens brings his enthusiasm to work. "I'm a consumer research junkie. And since we're a family business we can make changes fairly quickly," he says. Molbak's remains distinguished by the fact that it grows 60 to 70 percent of all its annual and perennial stock at the farm, as well as every one of the poinsettias for which they're famous. But these days the nursery, known for its trees and shrubs, is carrying a greater variety of perennials and grasses. Jens is planning displays to inspire and educate nursery visitors. A redesign, based on the organizing principles of a garden, is in the works, which should make navigating the multi-acre nursery more intuitive.

Jens has hired a new team to help him plan for Molbak's next 50 years. "I still have a lot to learn about gardening," he admits. Then he brightens up and adds, "Right now I'm on a bulb kick . . . and I've gone from not understanding hedges to needing hedges."

Valerie Easton is a Seattle freelance writer. Her e-mail address is valeaston@comcast.net. John Lok is a Seattle Times staff photographer.

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