

Boots in the Forest

CLARK FLEEGE

By Jaimie Olle

“I can’t believe I get paid to do this,” Lucky Peak nursery manager Clark Fleege says, his eyes wandering over the various greenhouses, fields and warehouses scattered about the 60 acres of nursery grounds. “Every day is a good day—I’ve worked worse jobs, in worse places, for less pay.”

Fleege, along with a collection of foresters, biologists, botanists and horticulturists, tends to millions of seedlings and shrubs being grown for reforestation throughout Regions 3 and 4 of the Forest Service, which encompass a large portion of the west, spanning from the Canadian to the Mexican border. Lucky Peak Nursery, founded in 1959, began by growing conifers primarily for the U.S. Forest Service. In recent years, the nursery has grown more than half of its crop for other agencies.



Clark Fleege, Lucky Peak Nursery manager for the Boise National Forest, stands among seedlings inside one of the greenhouses at the facility, which produces native trees and shrubs for Regions 3 and 4 of the Forest Service and for several state and federal agencies.

“Our goal is to provide seedlings at the best cost to other agencies,” Fleege states, while considering what this means in a larger context. “We provide plants for land management, meaning that we get the chance to play an active role in the reforestation of the western U.S.”

Lucky Peak Nursery produces a variety of seedling species including ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir, Engelmann spruce and western larch. During the last growing season, on top of providing millions of seedlings to national forests, Lucky Peak Nursery produced large volumes of sagebrush and other native shrubs for Bureau of Land Management districts throughout the Great Basin, as well as for the Idaho Fish and Game Department.

“It may seem routine if you look at the nursery from year-to-year, but it’s very dynamic,” Fleege points out. The nursery gets requests for non-traditional plants, which requires Fleege and his team to research the best methods for producing these seedlings. The nature of his work has become increasingly complex.

Fleege has a career chock-full of experience. After graduating in the 1970s from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in forest management, he joined the Peace Corps and headed to West Africa for two years.

“I knew that there had to be more to the world than the Midwest,” he affirms, when considering his decision to go abroad after college.

While in West Africa, Fleege worked in a nursery growing seedlings for four local villages. During this time, he began sowing the seeds for his future career. When he returned to the United States, he worked for state forest nurseries in South Dakota and Oklahoma. From there, he spent eight years at the Forest Service’s Charles E. Bessey Nursery in Nebraska. Fleege has been at the Lucky Peak Nursery for the past 16 years.

Fleege’s foreign nursery work didn’t end with the Peace Corps. He has been selected for a number of details through the Forest Service’s International Forestry program. Throughout the years, he has travelled to Afghanistan, Ecuador and Russia to help their governments develop plans for producing native plants.

Fleege cites being a Boy Scout during his childhood as a major source of inspiration for wanting a career outdoors. When not tending to seedlings, you’ll still find him on the Boise National Forest. He spends much of his time mountain biking, camping and upland bird hunting.

“When I go mountain biking through previously burned areas, I get to see trees that we grew that have been planted. When I go bird hunting, I hike through trees produced right here,” he emphasizes by directing his finger and gaze to the greenhouses. “It’s very rewarding to be part of the Forest Service side of nursery management because I’m helping with the restoration of public land.”

The one outdoor activity Fleege doesn’t do too much of outside of work is gardening. His wife tends most of their plants at home. However, he does faithfully grow a crop of rhubarb. Rhubarb happens to be his favorite.

As Fleege nears retirement, he still believes that he “has the best job in the outfit.” He can’t picture himself doing anything else.

“I really believe in public lands,” Fleege says with conviction. “As employees of the Forest Service, we are charged with proper land management. We are stewards of the land, and it is up to us to assist by doing our jobs in the most cost-effective manner that will benefit current and future generations.”