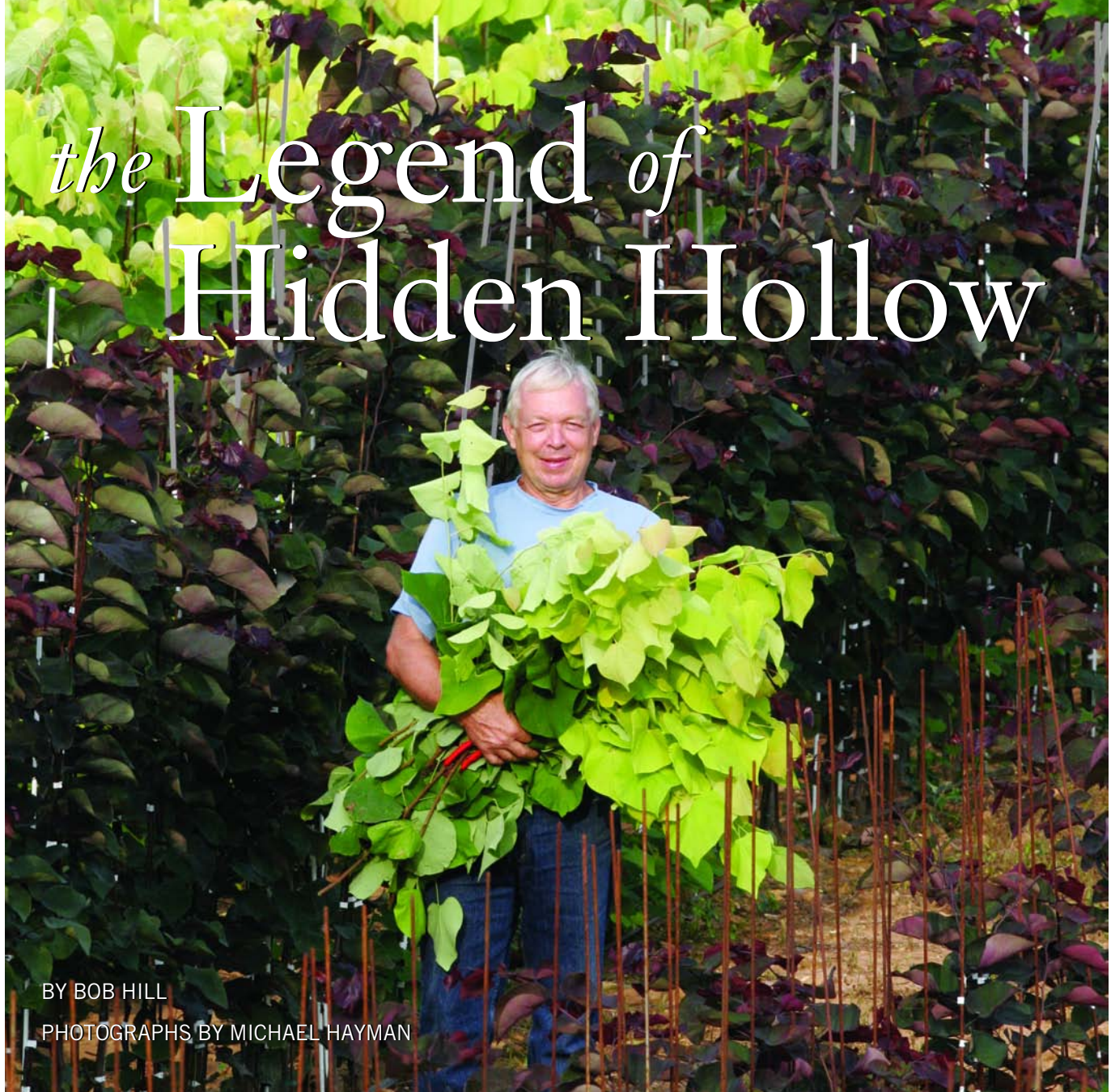


the Legend of Hidden Hollow



BY BOB HILL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL HAYMAN

Working beneath the radar, Harald Neubauer is one of the propagation wizards who keeps wholesale and retail nurseries stocked with the latest woody plant selections.

IT IS WELL WORTH the dusty trip along winding Buncombe Road in south central Tennessee just to walk with Harald Neubauer through the fields of his family nursery. The vigorous 66-year-old's face is tanned, his hair almost white, his enthusiasm contagious.

Behind him, the sun-bright leaves of thousands of field-grown redbuds—*Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' and 'Hearts of Gold'—stretch out in long, undulat-

ing ribbons of purple and warm gold toward the surrounding green hills. Continuing the redbud parade are the glossy-green leaves of 'Traveller', a weeping redbud, and 'Silver Cloud', a white-on-green variegated redbud introduced by legendary Kentucky plantsman Theodore Klein.

Their long rows join almost 100,000 other diverse shade and ornamental plants that Neubauer and his son, Alex, have

budded in the field and offer in their Hidden Hollow Nursery catalog.

GRAFTING MAGIC

The trees are the product of an outdoor propagating technique Neubauer all but pioneered; he was the first American nurseryman to bud thousands of magnolias and witch hazels in the field. Budding is a form of grafting in which a single bud of a desired plant is inserted into a slit in the

Surrounded by rows of field-grown 'Forest Pansy' and 'Hearts of Gold' redbuds, Harald Neubauer carries a harvest of freshly cut budwood.

“Harald is one of the great people in the business. He, like the noble Don Shadow, can put roots on a telephone pole.”

—Michael Dirr, woody plant expert

bark of a stock plant. He perfected the technique the hard way—bent like a human horseshoe over his rootstocks for long hours in the Tennessee sun.

“I didn’t want to propagate indoors because I didn’t want to water plants every day,” Neubauer recalls. “I decided to throw the book away and write my own.”

He is still easily able to bend at the waist and place the palms of his hands flat on the ground, but with Alex joining the nursery full-time about nine years ago, Harald has cut back his grafting schedule, which lasts three months each year, from seven days a week to a mere six. “I’m slowing down,” he says.

Father and son will annually bud the 100,000 plants on their 10 acres, well up from the “couple thousand” redbuds Harald budded 22 years ago when he first started the nursery.

The budding understock is either grown from seed or purchased in huge lots. Using irrigation lines, fertilizer, and attention to detail, the Neubauers can annually

coax six to eight feet of growth from each tiny bud. It is “biological magic with a knife, bud sticks, and rootstocks,” says Michael Dirr, a University of Georgia horticulture professor and woody plant expert.

ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW

Scattered among the long rows of plants are many new selections found by gardening friends around the world and sent to the Neubauers to evaluate and propagate. One of the challenges for plant growers is recognizing worthy new plants; another is meeting the demand for their production. “Harald makes the best of the new varieties available quickly,” says John Elsley, horticultural director of Klehm’s Song Sparrow Nursery in Avalon, Wisconsin.

Neubauer’s intuition and production efficiency both came into play with the introduction of ‘Hearts of Gold’ redbud. The plant, with its golden yellow leaves in spring, was discovered in 2003 growing near a dentist’s office in North Carolina, and was referred to Neubauer by North

Carolina horticulturist Jon Roethling.

“I was told if I needed someone to propagate a redbud, Harald was the man,” says Roethling. “He’s one of the best budders and grafters there is.” So he sent a piece to Neubauer. Within a few years Neubauer had hundreds flowing across his fields, in anticipation of the demand for the new selection.

When Dirr saw ‘Hearts of Gold’ for the first time at the JC Raulston Arboretum in Raleigh, North Carolina, he says, “I could not contain my enthusiasm.” He inquired where he could get one and almost immediately received one sent by Neubauer via a mutual friend. “He already had the plant in production,” marvels Dirr. “He’s always ahead of the curve.”

Steve Hottovy of Beyond Green nursery in Dayton, Oregon, had a similar experience with the ‘Wildfire’ black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*), which sports dramatic burgundy new growth in spring. At first, Hottovy thought the plant was a photinia that had popped up in a batch of seedlings.



Above: Harald Neubauer and his son and business partner, Alex, right, stand amid a field of a yet-unnamed variegated dogwood variety that features an attractive reddish blush on new growth, left.



Bud grafting in the field requires a strong back, as Alex Neubauer and a nursery employee demonstrate, above, while budding 'Tennessee Pink' redbuds onto a row of rootstock. The process, left, involves removing a section of bark from the rootstock where a bud of the desired plant, or scion, will be attached.

He mentioned the plant when Neubauer was visiting Oregon. The following year, Hottovy sent Neubauer some scion wood.

"He sent back eight-foot trees in one season," Hottovy says. "It was amazing."

EARLY UPHEAVALS

It is also amazing that Neubauer ended up in rural Tennessee at all. He was born in 1941 in Silesia, a strongly German area in what is now Poland. When the Russian Army approached the region at the end of World War II, his father, a railroad employee, smuggled out his wife and four children in a railroad car. The family fled to Torgau on the Elbe River,

which, after the war, was part of Communist East Germany.

Neubauer's childhood playground was littered with the refuse of war: guns, phosphorus grenades, and airplane fuel tanks. His first garden was a collection of small cacti. After about 10 years in Torgau, Neubauer's father arranged once again to have the family concealed in a railroad car compartment and smuggled past armed guards across the Iron Curtain to West Germany, where he met them.

"It must have been rough on my parents," says Neubauer. "That was twice they left everything behind."

LEARNING THE TRADE

After high school, an uncle with a nursery in Berlin helped Neubauer get a job at a nursery in Elmshorn, where he learned to graft plants such as willows, currants, and gooseberries. The experience got him

hooked. "It seemed like magic," he says.

In 1964, at 23, he brought what Elsley calls "a traditional nursery background and a European sensibility" to the United States for a one-year apprenticeship at the Shadow family nursery near Winchester, Tennessee. There he worked with Don Shadow, another nursery legend in the making, establishing his American roots. Hidden Hollow would eventually be located only a few miles from Shadow's nursery.

Neubauer returned to Germany to attend college and after graduation went to work for a veneer manufacturing company. His first assignment was a six-month jaunt along the barely navigable roads of South America in a Volkswagen bus in search of veneer. "It was quite a trip," he says. "I didn't speak a word of Spanish."

Over the next few years, as he traveled through Central and South America,



Harald Neubauer was the first to mass-produce Lavender Twist® weeping eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis* 'Covey'), a small variety featuring purplish-pink flowers and contorted branches.

Neubauer learned to speak Spanish, English, Dutch, and Portuguese.

He met his future wife, Susie, on a blind date while back in Tennessee for a visit. They were married in 1970 and lived for a time in Honduras. But Neubauer missed propagating plants. "You cut down a lot of trees in the veneer business. I thought it was time to pay back." So the Neubauers decided to return to Tennessee and start a nursery.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

In the early days, Neubauer raised cattle on the farm while grafting Japanese maples for Don Shadow. But he stubbornly began

field grafting redbuds and witch hazels for himself. "I love witch hazels," he says, but he was told they'd be difficult to sell since they would already have bloomed by the time the garden centers opened in spring. "I said, well, all of Europe can't be wrong because everybody has a witch hazel in their yard," says Neubauer.

Susie Neubauer worked with her husband in the fields and handled the office work. Neubauer honed his techniques while increasing his stock and client base.

Over time, the Neubauers expanded their small house, nursery, and family. Sons Nick and Alex both worked in the nursery, but it was Alex who developed the most in-



Hidden Hollow Nursery

214 Tanager Hill Lane
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■ Hidden Hollow is a wholesale nursery and is not open to the public. For information about wholesale plant orders and availability, e-mail Alex Neubauer at amyandalexn@aol.com.

terest in plants and propagation. After attending the University of North Carolina in Asheville, Alex returned to Tennessee to help with the family nursery. Now co-owner of Hidden Hollow, he and his wife, Amy, and their two children live in a house near the propagation fields.

REDBUDS, DOGWOODS, AND MORE

Of the 100,000 plants they propagate, only about half end up as stock the Neubauers will ship all over the United States and the world. The rest are culled in the interest of quality control. "We have a reputation for good plants," says Neubauer.

Shipping season means 90-hour work weeks for everyone. The Neubauers push to keep the plants going out the door—and their ever-growing customer base supplied—has been matched by another challenge: finding new plants to propagate.

One of Neubauer's most significant contributions to the garden industry, according to Elsley, is "the wider availability and greater selection of redbuds." In addition to 'Forest Pansy', 'Hearts of Gold', 'Traveller', and 'Silver Cloud', there are 'Appalachian Red', a glowing pink-red introduction from the late Max Byrkit of Hagerstown, Maryland; 'Tennessee Pink', a Neubauer introduction with true pink blooms; and 'Royal White', a prolific white-flowered selection.

And redbuds are only part of the show. The fields include dozens of rare cultivars of dogwood (*Cornus kousa* and *C. florida*), yellowwood (*Cladrastis kentukea*), sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), magnolia (*Magnolia* spp.), witch hazels (*Hamamelis* spp.), zelkova (*Zelkova serrata*), and black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*).

Neubauer found this variegated native witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), which he has cloned at Hidden Hollow Nursery.

HARALD NEUBAUER'S INTRODUCTIONS

Here are some of Harald Neubauer's favorite selections—both in cultivation and under evaluation.

Black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*)

'Autumn Cascades' (a weeping form)

'Red Rage' (clean green leaves)

'Wildfire' (red-tipped new growth)

Cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*)

'Kintoki' (a dwarf cultivar with bright green leaves)

Eastern dogwood (*Cornus florida*)

'Appalachian Spring' (a white-flowered plant resistant to anthracnose)

Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*)

'Appalachian Red' (brilliant reddish, pink flowers)

'Hearts of Gold' (golden-yellow foliage)

'Tennessee Pink' (Neubauer's own selection with a true pink flower)

'Traveller' (a weeper with glossy green leaves)

Sweet bay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*)

'Coosa' (dwarf form)

'Green Bay' (evergreen)

Sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*)

'Slender Silhouette' (can grow 60 feet tall and six feet wide)

Tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*)

'Little Volunteer' (dwarf form)

Witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*)

'Little Susie' and 'Little Daddy' (dwarf forms)

'Mohawk Red' (red flowers)

Zelkova (*Zelkova serrata*)

'Ogon' (yellow-green leaves and light orange bark)

The Neubauer propagation fields typically include 35,000 dogwoods, 15,000 redbuds, and 7,000 witch hazels among the other woody treasures.

Eastern dogwood (*Cornus florida*) selections include red-flowered 'Cherokee Chief' and white, double-flowered 'Plena'. Hidden Hollow also offers three new mildew- and anthracnose-resistant dogwoods from the University of Tennessee: 'Appalachian Blush', 'Appalachian Snow', and 'Appalachian Spring'.




Top: 'Wolf Eyes' is one of several Chinese dogwood cultivars propagated at Hidden Hollow Nursery. Above: Harald Neubauer takes cuttings from a new variety of dogwood produced from a cross between Chinese and American species.

Chinese dogwoods (*Cornus kousa*) include the heavy-blooming 'Milky Way', the pink-flowered 'Satomi', and the green-and-white variegated 'Wolf Eyes'.

There are also his homegrown surprises to be evaluated; the variegated, dwarf, upright, or weeping plants the Neubauers find popping up among their own stock or in the surrounding fields and woods. "Every spring you get new stuff," says Neubauer. "They start coming out like little kids and you want to run over to see what they're turning into."

With his eye for recognizing remarkable plants and his gift for propagating them, Neubauer has helped introduce numerous varieties that might otherwise have been

lost. He "saved many one-of-a-kind plants for us from a single, dying stick of wood," says landscape architect and plant explorer Ozzie Johnson of Chamblee, Georgia.

Neubauer combines his skills with patience, hard work, and a demand for quality. Johnson observes that Neubauer's "uniqueness begins with his honest, open demeanor and hospitality and ends with the great contributions he has made to the introduction of great garden-worthy plants." As Dirr notes, "Our gardens are richer for his passion and efforts." 

Bob Hill is a columnist for the Louisville Courier-Journal and a co-owner of Hidden Hill rare plant nursery and sculpture garden.