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LeBallister's: A Family Owned Seed and Fertilizer Company with More Than 50 Years of Experience

Article and photos by Rachel LaFranchi

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During LeBallister's Seed and Fertilizer's busy time of the year, customers can find three generations working for the family-run business. The business is primarily managed by Kelly Boyer with help from her father Tom Hendrickson who started the business. Tom has taken a step back from the day to day operations especially during the off-season. Kelly's son Nathan also helps out with the family business part-time between his college classes.



Tom Hendrickson and Kelly Boyer stand next to OSB, LeBallister's most popular cover crop blend.

LeBallister's started in 1947 with Hendrickson's grandfather George LeBallister. LeBallister bought an apple ranch in Sebastopol following WWII where he packed apples and had a roadside fruit stand. LeBallister was selling agricultural chemicals and fertilizers out of his packing house as a side business.

Hendrickson had worked on his grandfather's apple farm during high school and college, but went into pharmaceutical sales for 12 years after he was finished with school. In 1980, Hendrickson purchased his grandfather's inventory and started selling it.

During the first two years, Hendrickson sold just fertilizers. In 1985, he bought seed equipment and inventory from Nelligan Feed Store and expanded his business. Today, LeBallister's business is half seed and half fertilizer.

Hendrickson said his business was on the forefront of cover cropping and erosion control, but pastured grass and turf grass were also large parts of his business at the

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time. As the vineyard industry grew around him, so did Hendrickson's seed and fertilizer business.

Hendrickson moved his business from Sebastopol to Santa Rosa in the early 90's to become more centralized to the ag industry.

In 2000, Boyer's husband got a job at Sonoma State University and LeBallister's had grown enough to support a second employee. Boyer, who had received an ag business degree from Cal Poly but previously been working in higher education at the University of Washington, joined her father in the seed business.

Boyer and Hendrickson said they have assumed a niche business, and they've grown exponentially over the years. Their growth has allowed them to purchase the building they were renting half of off Sebastopol Road in Santa Rosa and continue to grow into the space.

LeBallister's specializes in creating on-site custom mixes and offers consulting services. LeBallister's is geared towards commercial agriculture and landscape, offering custom mixes to their customers. A custom mixed cover crop called OSB Plowdown is their most popular product. OSB is a soil builder formulated to create nitrogen and increase organic matter in the soil.

In addition to cover crops, LeBallister's pasture blends are one of their best sellers. They also sell native grasses, wildflowers and wildflower mixes, turf grasses and oat and hay crops.

Hendrickson said wildflowers are a surprising part of their business. This year, they've sold more than 3,000 lbs of poppy seed alone. Wildflowers, including poppies, are often added to cover crop blends.

One of LeBallister's goals is to be able to solve issues for vineyards and landowners. They have a wildflower blend mix that helps bring in beneficial insects and a cover crop blend that helps with nematodes. They aim to assist and aid farmers with problems they have relating to soil and crops.

Hendrickson said the fertilizer business follows the seed business – most customers who buy seed will also buy fertilizer with it.

Boyer described the company's business as a bell-shaped curve, with the majority of their business in October and November. She said the company's biggest challenge is most of their customer's purchasing products all at once. And while the company does bring in seasonal staff, it's often not enough time to fully train someone to do the job.

Hendrickson said over his 37 years in the business, he is most grateful for LeBallister's loyal customer base. He said many people call and no longer ask for the price, trusting LeBallister's will give them a fair price and good service. Hendrickson said he is appreciative of his customer's long-term customers.

LeBallister's is located at 1250 Sebastopol Avenue in Santa Rosa. For more information call them at 707-526-6733.

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