



Headline: Safety Innovation a Family Tradition at Cannor Nurseries

Byline: Amy Petherick

Word Count: 1,049

The owners of a Chilliwack, British Columbia nursery owe at least part of their success to a family legacy of farm safety innovation.

Gordon Mathies and his daughter Tamara Mathies—representing the second and third generation of Mathieses to run Cannor Nurseries—uphold a family tradition of making safe farm practices a high priority at the nursery. “You can’t be everywhere all the time,” says Gordon Mathies, current Cannor Nurseries President. “It’s really about ownership for the employees over their own safety.”

Gordon Mathies credits his father as being the first safety innovator on their operation, as he was quick to get involved with the Farm and Ranch Safety and Health Association (FARSHA)—British Columbia’s safety association for agricultural employers—back in the early 1990s when the organization was just getting started. Fast forward two decades and the Mathieses have grown their operation while redoubled their safety efforts. Cannor is the largest wholesale nursery in Western Canada and Gordon Mathies now sits on the Board of FARSHA and is involved with the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA). At the nursery level, the Mathieses have established a series of formal safety procedures, which Gordon Mathies says demonstrate a continued commitment to safety since his father’s time at the helm.

The nursery now operates with a designated safety committee, formal safety meetings, and a written farm safety manual. His daughter Tamara Mathies wrote their safety manual and acts as the company safety officer. For Gordon Mathies, it all just makes good business sense. “If you get into a culture of safety on your farm, it means you have to think of new ways of doing jobs to make them as efficient as before, but safely,” he says. “Talking safety with your employees gets them to think of things more as well.”

As a family-based company, Tamara Mathies says it’s important to her that her coworkers understand that she cares about them both professionally and personally. “If the staff don’t think you care about their safety, then they’re not going to care about working hard for you,” she says.

Wendy Bennett is the Executive Director of FARSHA and has worked with the Mathieses and other British Columbia families to identify and control safety hazards on the farm. Bennett says she has personally seen how involved employees are at Cannor Nurseries. Although their focus on safety comes from the top, she says it’s demonstrated rather than preached. “Any of the workers are welcomed to come forward with suggestions and ideas or to notice when things aren’t as safe as they could be,” she says. “Then they brainstorm together, and [the Mathieses] involve the employees because they’re the ones doing the job.”

“Just because we’re the management doesn’t mean we always know best and our bodies aren’t doing it



eight hours a day!” says Tamara Mathies, who is also taking occupational health and safety studies part-time through the British Columbia Institute of Technology.

Bennett recalls one visit to the nursery, when she noticed workers riding around in a self-propelled cart with big wheels. They were using it to prune low foliage in place of bending over and doing it by hand. Bennett points out that working bent over for an extended period of time poses a considerable risk of musculoskeletal injury. The staff at Cannor Nurseries knew it too. So they approached the safety committee with their cart idea. “The Mathieses were willing to say ‘let’s try something different,’ not because they had to do it. But they pretty much eliminated that risk completely...and the workers initiated it,” says Bennett.

Glen Blahey is an Agricultural Safety and Health Specialist with the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association. He says ergonomics, or the applied science of equipment design intended to reduce injuries, is very important for nurseries and fruit and vegetable growers. “These industries tend to involve a lot of bending, lifting and repetitive motions, which can lead to strains of the hands, wrists, arms, back, shoulders and neck,” he says. “If employers take the time to help reduce strain injuries through ergonomics like the cart, handling techniques, good posture and frequent breaks, they will see the benefit” he adds, pointing out that fewer workers will be off injured and in better health generally.

Once the workers at Cannor had the go-ahead, they built the cart themselves. Bennett says this not only enhanced safety procedures, but also enhanced efficiency too. “I was watching the guys and they can go all day because they’re sitting down; they’re pushing with their feet; they’re at a comfortable angle; they’re not breaking their backs; and so they can prune the low branches; then they can walk and do the pruning at waist level.”

Tamara Mathies says it’s a solution she never would have thought of on her own as the safety officer. This is exactly why she makes sure that there is a representative from each aspect of the business—including management, shipping, packing, and fieldwork—on the safety committee. She also keeps a spot for an English-as-a-second-language representative since the nursery employs several workers originally from East India who are more comfortable coming forward using their native language.

Tamara Mathies says that the more she reads up about safety, the more she realizes being proactive about safety in the workplace really saves a business time and money. Happy workers are productive workers. “We want to keep people as knowledgeable as we can about everything we do so that they feel more comfortable in doing all the duties that we ask of them,” she says.

Gordon and Tamara Mathies are one of four producer families across Canada that have agreed to throw open their barn doors and share their farm safety stories over YouTube in the lead up to Canadian Agricultural Safety Week 2014. This year, the national public education campaign will run from March 9 to 15 under the theme “Let’s Talk About It!” which focuses on the importance of communication in the farm workplace. It’s organized by the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, with support this year from the Government of Canada through *Growing Forward 2*, Farm Credit Canada, Ag for Life, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, CHS, Imperial



Oil and Pioneer Hi-Bred Limited. To check out the Mathieses' operation up close, visit www.agsafetyweek.ca.

Cutlines:

CASW2014_Mathies_picture1

Tamara Mathies is the safety officer for Cannor Nurseries and wrote their safety manual. She says it's important to her that her coworkers understand that she cares about their well-being both professionally and personally.

CASW2014_Mathies_picture2

Tamara and Gordon Mathies are a dynamic father and daughter duo representing the second and third generation at Cannor Nurseries. Gordon Mathies credits his father with being the first safety innovator on their operation back in the early 1990s.

CASW2014_Mathies_picture3

Gordon Mathies, President of Cannor Nurseries, works hard to uphold the family tradition of making farm safety a high priority. His daughter Tamara Mathies has written their safety manual and is the company's safety officer.

