

**Focus on Valley Nursery:**  
**Cold-Hardy Natives from the Helena Valley**  
**by *Patrick Plantenberg and Kathy Lloyd***

*from Kelseya, Summer 2006*

Clayton Berg is a slightly built 74-year-old with lots of experience and the opinions to go with it. An entomologist with a minor in botany and horticulture from South Dakota State University in Brookings, Clayton has always been interested in trees; whether fishing along Montana rivers or out collecting plants, trees always catch his attention.

Clayton Berg, the “Plants Man,” has had Valley Nursery since the 1960’s when he bought an alfalfa field and started to grow plants in the area that is now his nursery. Valley Nursery, 10-acres in the Helena Valley, boasts the largest collection of cold hardy plants for the northern U.S., and grows and propagates native plants from the northern U.S. as well as introduced plants from all across Canada, northern Europe, and northern Asia. Valley Nursery has over 80 native woody plant collections that have survived the Helena Valley climate for years and can be propagated for sale.

Clayton is a grower—and not, as he makes clear, just a peddler—who specializes in plant evaluation, testing, and breeding. He acquires information by growing the plants. Clayton depends on open pollination, chance seedlings, and cross-pollination. As he says, “Darwin was for real. The seed source or cutting source is important.” Over the years he has found some plants from the Belt Mountains to be hardier than plants from the Continental Divide.

Valley Nursery sells native and introduced plants propagated from Clayton’s collections to Sunrise Nursery in Billings, and they ship plants to both coasts and Canada. Clayton has many named varieties and has two patented selections of juniper. His ‘winter blue’ juniper is probably a *J. horizontalis* X *J. scopulorum*

cross, collected right in his nursery. His 'blue creeper' juniper was collected between Helena and Glacier Park. Some large nurseries are growing Valley Nursery plant collections, including Monrovia Nursery in California, Bailey Nursery in Minnesota, and Douglas Nursery in Canby, Oregon. Clayton has had the opportunity to buy his own plants back for retail sale at the nursery, which ensures the plants' hardiness in the Montana climate. But Valley Nursery has had limited plant sales to MNPS members and Montana nurseries. Clayton would like to make the information he has learned available so people make better choices when buying plant materials and would like to reach more of the local market in Montana. As the demand and market for native plants increases, Valley Nursery will be able to grow even more natives adapted to our climate. Clayton and his assistant for 15 years, Sharon Teigen, will gladly propagate any of their native woody plant collections for sale.

With Clayton everything is an educational endeavor. He worked for the Forest Service in the 50's as a smoke jumper and for a while at the Rocky Mountain Lab in Corvallis. Clayton was also a city-county sanitarian in Helena. During his tenure he was able to get the sewage out of Helena streams, an accomplishment of which he is proud. He is an avid reader, but does not claim to be self-taught when it comes to plant propagation. "That would be too restrictive," Clayton says. Clayton has had the opportunity to associate with many experts in plant growing (Porter, Skinner, Dropmore, Kerr, Sutherland, Simonette, Cummings, Holliday, Moran), and is a keeper of their plant materials.

Clayton and Sharon took part in the Native Plant Landscaping Exhibition co-sponsored by the Kelsey Chapter in April, and generously donated native plants to sell as a chapter fundraiser. Many thanks!

For more information and to order plants for fall 2006 or spring 2007 delivery, contact Clayton or Sharon at Valley Nursery, 4303 Frontage Road, P.O. Box 4845, Helena, MT 59604 or call 458-3992.