One of the perks of living in Central Florida is exposure to beautiful, lush greenery virtually year-round. There is something to be said about the effects of coming home to a well-kept, attractive landscape. Not only does it promote a sense of pride in one's property, it provides the perfect venue for entertaining friends and family members.

County Line Ornamental and Tree's primary line of business consists of landscape foundations, such as woody ornamentals, containerized hardwood trees, shrubs and mulch. Customers get a better quality product at a lower price than can be found at bigbox garden centers, because the plants are grown locally with minimal overhead and no middleman to take an extra cut.

With its two locations in Mount Dora and Winter Garden, County Line can help homeowners realize their dreams of a beautiful yard without putting a strain on the budget. With 80 percent of its inventory grown on 60 acres of private land, County Line is able to maintain the crop's high standards from cuttings and seeds to maturity.

According to owner Matt Hodge, one of the keys to his success is keeping growing practices and operations consistent.

"I follow a program that has proven to work time and again, and I stick with it," Hodge said.

A fourth-generation grower with roots in the citrus industry, Hodge has years of experience under his belt.

"There are so many variables involved in growing," he said. "If you start changing things that have always worked, it may affect the crop. I believe in staying with the basics. That way I know we will produce a great plant or tree."

Though County Line does not grow its own palms, it has access to a wide selection of palm varieties.

Hodge travels throughout the state in search of growers who meet his standards.

"I don't buy from anyone unless I've been to their business," he said. "I can pull into a nursery and know immediately if it is a quality grower. I look at how the operation is set up, how healthy the plants are, spacing and if there is an infestation of weeds. When you are around something as long as I have been, you develop an eye for what is good."

Thorough training of his staff also is imperative to Hodge. Many come to County Line with plant-growing experience; however, new employees generally shadow Hodge or another

experienced manager for a year before they are allowed to deal with customers directly or to manage a crop. Understanding that good service begins with the customer's first encounter, office personnel receive extensive training in the operations of the nursery, as well as knowledge of the plants.

"I believe what sets us apart is the education and information we give to our customers," Hodge said. "If someone comes in with a question, we give them a straight answer. We let them know what will and won't work in their yard."

It may seem like an odd practice, but Hodge instructs his personnel to tell customers at least two negatives about a plant, as well as the benefits. For example, if a plant might be particularly susceptible to freezes or blooms only once a year.

"I want our customers to be fully informed before they plant it in their yard," he said.

Customers also can bring a clipping of a plant to County Line for identification and advice as to whether it is a good fit for their existing landscape.

Hodge resides in Windermere with his wife and son, but he grew up in Winter Garden.

"As soon as I could pick up a plant or use a broom to sweep a sidewalk, I was working," said Hodge about his early years in his parents' nursery.

He joked that his boyhood friends tended not to spend the night because they knew they would be hanging baskets in his dad's greenhouse the next morning.

"If we weren't playing sports, we were working in the business," said the West Orange High School graduate, who played football in college.

When it was time to decide which direction he would pursue in life, he looked to what he loved and knew best.

"I'm not just some salesman that decided to open up a nursery on a whim," Hodge said. "This is in my blood, and I really enjoy doing what I do. It is who I am."

County Line Tree and Ornamental offers two locations: 13246 W. Colonial Drive in Winter Garden and 8994 Sadler Road in Mount Dora. Operating hours are Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m.- 4:30 p.m. and Saturday from 7:30a.m.-2 p.m. For more information, call 407-654-4644 (Winter Garden) or 352-385-0812 (Mount Dora), or visit www.countylineot.com on the Web.