

Acquiring and Marketing “New” Plants

Randy Baldwin

San Marcos Growers, 125 S. San Marcos Road, Santa Barbara, California 93111 USA

rbaldwin@smgrowers.com

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Summary

San Marcos Growers nursery has come to be known in the industry for the introduction of exciting new plants. This could not

have been accomplished without the many people met along the way with similar interests.

INTRODUCTION

San Marcos Growers was founded in 1979 in Eastern Goleta Valley in Santa Barbara, California and ever since that time we have worked to "introduce" new plants into the nursery trade or reintroduce those plants that no longer were available. After 45 years of operation, this year will be our last full year that we will actively be propagating and planting new crops as

the nursery will close at the end of 2025 to make room for a housing development. It will be up to others to continue discovering, then growing, and promoting the plants we have come to call "Plants for the California Garden".

Morgan Bill Evans was one person to introduce us to many new and unusual plants. He began his horticultural career

working at his father, Hugh Evans' famous Los Angeles Nursery, first called Evans Gardens and later Evans and Reeves. Bill gained fame later working as the landscape architect for Walt Disney when building Southern California's first major theme park. Notably he also helped introduce plants he discovered in his travels, such as the Shogun collection of Asian plants later grown by Monrovia Nursery.

I fondly remember when I would ask him about a plant, I thought new in cultivation and he would point out when it was grown before saying, "It has all been done before my boy." This was a case with *Fabiana imbricata*, which I thought we introduced (both the white and purple form), but only to discover it listed in the 1928 edition of Bailey's Cyclopedia of Horticulture (later volumes renamed Hortus) as common in southern California at the time.

This talk is a story about how an interest in plants helped shape our nursery that has since come to be known in the industry for the introduction of exciting new plants, but it is also about the many people met with similar interests. I have come to the realization that many people have helped shape San Marcos Growers' goal of introducing sustainable and exciting new plants. It really is not what one knows, but who they know and there are way too many people I need to thank for helping us achieve this goal.

One particular person who has helped us out over the years is John Bleck. Dietes 'John's Runner', *Aeonium* 'Jolly Green 'Superb', and *Senecio* 'Jolly Gray' are just a few that he gave us and we named and introduced.

A more complete list of the plants John Bleck has given us, but even this is lacking as last week he dropped off cuttings of a new *Puya* hybrid that he had in his garden.

One of the plant meccas for unusual plants was certainly Western Hills Nursery. Many "new" plants into the nursery trade, including some that came from us, were picked up from this small nursery in Occidental, California. Co-owner Marshall Olbrich once noted to me that many such plants came from them, claiming that he and his partner Lester Hawkins introduced from sources in the UK the Sunrose (*Helianthemum*) cultivars that became very popular in California in the 1990s.

Such "introductions" made by larger nurseries from plants acquired from smaller ones was quite common and we experienced this when our 1992 introduction *Anisodonte* 'Tara's Pink', named for our beautiful Rhodesian Ridgeback Tara, who roamed the garden, was picked and displayed at a tradeshow as a new introduction by Hines Nursery.

I was still going to college and working at a Santa Barbara retail nursery when I met Fred Meyer. His interest in a wide diversity of plants opened my eyes wide to an amazing new world. He was most famous for the Meyer's hybrid *Alstroemeria*, but he was also quite interested in and worked with other bulbs, coral trees, kangaroo paws, restios and New Zealand flax. It was Fred's interest in *Phormium* hybrids for cut foliage for the floral market that led to my visit with Margaret Jones in New Zealand and the importation in 1985 of the many New Zealand flax hybrids

that we became known for and that became extremely popular in the nursery trade in subsequent years. I even gave a talk to about these first *Phormium* introductions at the 1998 Western Region IPPS annual meeting. While on the topic of *Phormium*, it was a group of Bay Area horticulturists and designers who first gave me the amazing large red flax with weepy foliage that we named 'Wildwood' to honor the southern California nursery where it came from, Ray Walsch's Wildwood Nursery.

Another well-known destination nursery for great plants was Carman's Nursery in Los Gatos, California that was established in by Hugh Carman in 1937 and operated later by his son Ed. Jewell plants were abundant in this nursery. One such plant was a rosemary that Ed had as a hedge across the front of his property. I got a plant of it on a visit in the mid-1980s. Ed swore that this plant was the true 'Tuscan Blue' rosemary cultivar, but it was so different than what ALL other nurseries were growing under this name that we, and Dave Fross of Native Sons Nursery, eventually introduced it into the trade, calling it 'Ed Carman'. Note that rosemary plants are now included in the huge genus *Salvia*. I will not elaborate on this other than note that this trend is what my friend Kathy Musial calls "Namenclutter". Another plant originating at Carman's Nursery was *Tetrapanax papyrifer* 'Steroidal Giant', which he received from Japan in the 1970s and we got later from Sean Hogan at Cistus Nursery. It is a giant of a plant and most importantly it regularly produces viable seed, so we are able to produce seed grown prodigy of it.

One of the most important plants we first purchased from Ed Carman has since

become the most popular tree we sell and we owe thanks no only to Ed, but also to Victor and Carla Reiter for planting it in their San Francisco garden in 1944 and also to the Saratoga Horticultural Foundation who introduced this tree and contracted it to be micropropagated by Briggs Nursery in Washington. This tree shown on our website in the Reiter's garden, from which all *Arbutus* 'Marina' were propagated, no longer exists but the tree planted in our own garden last measured over 50 feet tall and 65 feet wide and is the listed California Big Tree and National Champion on Cal Poly San Luis Obispo's "Big Tree" registry.

Our nursery is closely associated with Ganna Walska Lotusland Botanic Garden and one event each fall called The Exceptional Plant Auction brings out all serious plant people and great plants, some that we have later propagated and offered for sale. The 2024 auction on October 5th will coincide with our last San Marcos Growers Field Day the day before. Stay tuned for more information about these plant parties!

Lotusland's original fern garden was designed by talented designer and plantsman Bill Paylen. It used good quantities of famed *Begonia* hybridizer Rudy Ziesenhenné's plants, including one he named 'Lotusland'. Rudy Ziesenhenné created and named many great landscape begonias, naming one for his son and others after locations in Santa Barbara. I believe San Marcos Growers is one of the only nurseries going these Ziesenhenné begonias.

Lotusland's fern garden designer Bill Paylen was memorialized with the nam-

ing of a beautiful *Dyckia* by another incredible plantsman, Bill Baker. Many of our *Dyckia* hybrids that we selected and named were Bill Baker seedlings and most importantly he was our original source of *Agave victoriae-reginae* 'Albo-marginata', what has come to be called the White Rhino Agave. Twenty years after acquiring our first plants of this beautiful agave we have built up our propagation stock by coring our 400 stock plants so that we are now the primary supplier of this beautiful plant in California. There is one of these plants on the raffle table.

For all things succulent, be they agaves, aloes or echeveria, Brian Kemble at the Ruth Bancroft Garden, is a primary source of plants, seed and information. Aloe 'Birds & Bees' and Aloe 'Red Bird' are two hybrids were selections that we made and named from open-pollinated seed from *Aloe arborescens* that Brian Kemble sent to us in 2007 and we introduced the plants in 2014. We have been building stock on this hybrid of *Aloe dhufarensis*, which was grown from seed supplied by Brian, that we call 'Dhufar Rose'. We will not have it in any great quantity by the time we close the nursery.

Tom Cole of Cold Spring Aloes has also provided us with seed and plants of Kenyan and Ugandan aloes, including the amazing *Aloe lukeana* that Tom named for his late brother Luke. We are the primary supplier of this plant in the nursery trade and with the 179 taxa of aloe in active production, we supply many of the aloes sold in California.

David Verity was the manager of UCLA's Mildred Mathias Botanic Garden and he made many aloe hybrids, including

the one introduced by the Huntington Botanic Garden named after him. We also named *Aloe* 'Dave's Delight' to honor him. Dave Verity was also well known as one of the first people to breed and release native monkeyflowers.

We were also fortunate to work with Rich Persoff with the introduction of both his Kids and Jelly Bean Series of monkeyflowers. One of his last introductions before he passed was the beautiful picotee 'Fiesta Marigold'.

My college schooling focused on native plants, so it was natural that this interest continued at the nursery. I was fortunate in this regard to meet and learn propagation techniques from Dara Emery, the plant breeder and propagator at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. His breeding created the great 'Canyon Snow' Pacific Coast Iris and the Quartet Series of *Heuchera*. Dara tutored Carol Bornstein when she came to the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden in 1981, and we still grow most of her great native plant introductions.

After Carol left the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, she provided us with additional great plants that we introduced at our nursery, including *Solanum xanti* 'Mountain Pride' in 2011, *Keckiella cordifolia* 'Mountain Flare' in 2016 and *Encelia californica* 'Paleo Yellow' in 2017.

We also introduced several native plant selections we made or that were given to us. *Salvia leucophylla* 'Point Sal Spreader', introduced in 1986 was a plant from John Bleck. *Juncus patens* 'Elk Blue', introduced in 1994, was a plant I collected on private property near Elk, CA and *Ribes viburnifolium* 'Spooners Mesa' introduced in 1998, was a plant collected by Dylan Hannon. This year we

will be introducing a vivid red form of *Eriogonum grande* var. *rubescens* that was found growing in a southern California garden.

I was fortunate to be introduced to the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum in the early years of the nursery, again thanks to Fred Meyer and it was on a trip to get our hands on this wonderful lilac purple form of the blue hibiscus. This led to a long relationship with the garden as a partner in the Koala Blooms Australian Plant Introduction Program for which I could give a whole talk on the 64 plants that were introduced between 2001 and 2018.

Fred Meyer also introduced me to kangaroo paws (*Anigozanthos*) in 1979 and later got us together with Angus Stewart, one of the primary breeders of these plants. Angus Stewart's Landscape Series Kangaroo Paws was exclusively available from San Marcos Growers.

Kangaroo paws and other Australian plants are also a fascination of Kathy Musial at the Huntington Botanical Gardens and so many great plants came our way through association with the Huntington staff.

Kathy and Bart Obrien, then at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, with Pacific Horticulture introduced the very fine plant *Deppia splendens* 'Cristóbal' that we started growing in 2001.

Through the Huntington Botanical Gardens and its International Succulent Introductions (ISI) program came the many *Aeonium* hybrids of Jack Catlin. This ISI program at the Huntington Botanical Gardens is managed by their Desert Garden curator, John Trager. He has been instrumental in the introduction of

many plants and with Pacific Plant Promotions and the Huntington's ISI of *Agave* 'Blue Flame', a hybrid created by David Verity that has become extremely popular.

Greg Starr in Tucson has been an inspiration with his work on *Agave* and after he described and named *Agave ovatifolia* we got our first plants from him in 2004 that we propagated from and began selling three years later.

A few of our own named *Agave* selections that have become very popular. *Agave potatorum* from seed collected near the town of El Camarón in Oaxaca, Mexico was one such selection. 'Mateo' was a selection we made from our *Agave bracteosa* crops and was named for one of our salesman. I named *Agave* 'Stained Glass' because of the showy variegation reminded me of stained glass and also to honor the original Lotusland curator and Cactus and Succulent Journal Editor Charlie Glass, since the plant had originally come from him. This plant and 'Mateo' are now grown by many other nurseries.

We had this very nice small agave from the collection of Alice Waidhofer that we shared with Tony Avent. The next thing I knew we were getting lab-micro-propagated plants of it from Hans Hanson, then at Shady Oaks Nursery in , which were from plants that Tony sent to him. This was the beginning of a nice relationship with Hans as he worked on some of our own agaves. We purchased many others that Yucca Do and Plant Delights Nurseries had come up with. Hans has worked on a diverse amount of plants, but is now most famous in succulent circles

for his *Mangave* selections. We are fortunate to be licensed to propagate and sell some of the Walters Gardens Mad About Mangave collection, including the beautiful 'Kaleidoscope' which we maintain propagation stock in our greenhouse of. We core these plants to promote pupping and also taken the bulbils from the inflorescences for our crops.

In Jeff Moore's book, "Agaves: species, cultivars and hybrids," there is a picture of our display collection of 35 different *Mangave* cultivars, which are all part of the incredible Mad About Mangave collection from Hans Hansen at Walters Gardens.

The *Clivia* lily (*Clivia miniata*) is beautiful in this mass planting under oaks, but starting in 1993 we were able to offer 1-gallon yellow clivia plants from our own breeding program whose objective was to produce reliably yellow-flowering plants by seed propagation.

At a fateful plant sale in 1984, I met the "grassman" and meadow master John Greenlee. We were already growing a few ornamental grasses, but we were suddenly growing many more and also getting known for them. Ornamental grasses and our friendship and collaboration with John Greenlee has been important to our nursery ever since!

John Greenlee gave us a fastigiate form of *Cupressus guadalupensis* in the late 1990s that he had selected from a seed lot. In 2002, we introduced it as 'Greenlee's Blue Rocket'. The picture (not shown) on the left taken in the parking lot at Descanso Garden where a group of this cultivar was planted and on the right the original tree, now gone, that stood as

sentinel years after John had moved from his original Pomona Garden.

John also introduced me to Texas plantsman Scott Ogden, who had introduced many fantastic plants, including *Parthenocissus* 'Hacienda Creeper' and *Pittosporum* 'Oakleaf' which were both named by Scott, but we popularized them in California and *Pittosporum* 'Oakleaf' has become one of our signature plants that we are known for.

Jay Kapac is a well-known geranium breeder who partnered with us to release this beautiful series of *Pelargonium* that he named for the song "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" on Bob Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks" album.

I have always had a fascination with 'Pride of Madeira' and over the years introduced quite a few selections including 'San Bruno Pink' in 2006 and 'Rincon Blue' in 2011. We got from Lance Reiners, the Paintbox Plantsman's *Echium candicans* 'Star of Madeira' at the 2003 San Francisco Garden Show and have grown it ever since. We selected and named the wild 'Starburst' after noting this unusual vegetative sport from 'Star of Madeira'.

We began growing *Lomandra* at San Marcos Growers in 1990 and a majority of this first crop went into this planting at Madame Ganna Walska Lotusland in 1992 where the planting remains as an attractive large-scale groundcover under 'Blue Gums' (*Eucalyptus globulus*). These were among the first *Lomandra* in California. In 2019, I spoke to IPPS about what I call the "*Lomandra* Revolution" and these two shown, 'Breeze' and 'Seascape,' were among the first cultivars that started it off, but we currently grow 19

varieties. We have a page on our website with them all listed in case you are interested. There is a plant of the beautiful, variegated cultivar 'Lucky Stripe' on the raffle table. There are now many *Lomandra* in cultivation with 'Platinum Beauty' being the most popular and 'Baby Breeze,' which we exclusively grow, being one of the newest and smallest growing. These are tough plants that are available in a diverse range of form and foliage colors.

The first tissue-cultured, mass produced *Lomandra* was Ozbreed's 'Tanika,' marketed in the US as 'Breeze.' We first received this plant in 2003 and planted it in our own garden in 2004.

Starting with my friend Fred Myer's encouragement, I have long been interested in the *Protea* family. Time limits me from beginning to mention all of the fantastic Australian *Grevillea*, but I do need to touch briefly on the South African pins and *Leucadendron*.

We have participated with plant introductions from other commercial partners and this image shows their logo. These companies with our help have introduced into the California nursery trade many great plants – too many to list all in this presentation but will mention one particular plant introduction.

We are a trial site location for Plant Haven and a plant brought to us in 1999 by a local Santa Barbara gardener. Thinking the plant worthy, we steered her to PlantHaven and *Salvia leucantha* 'Santa Barbara' received a US plant patent and in the year 2000, we introduced the plant into the nursery trade at the Western Nursery and Garden Expo held in Las Vegas that year. We have still done a few

trade shows to market plants, but in a couple weeks will do our last one, the NorCal show in northern California.

Over the years, San Marcos Growers has held many open houses that we call Field Day. Later this year, on October 4th, we will hold our fourteenth to celebrate our 45 years in business. Since it will be the last one we hold before closing the nursery next year, we are calling this one "The Last Dance at SMG".

Our best marketing method over the years has been our website with its active server pages about the plants we grow that attracts about 160,000 hits per month. This reminds me that I gave a talk to IPPS in the year 2000 about "Establishing & Maintaining a Nursery Website".

Just a quick story if there is time about a great plant that somewhat got away from us. We saw *Alstroemeria* 'Indian Summer' all over the UK when visiting in 2017, but back stateside the only supplier of this cultivar called 'Tesronto' was a small mail-order nursery in Oregon called Edelweiss Perennials. It was expensive, but I knew I had to go for it and we started building stock.

A few months later, I happened to see patent information on an "improved" selection also marketed as 'Indian Summer' called 'Tesronto' and then started seeing this plant available from plug suppliers so purchased it, as we had to have this great plant. We planted both the original 'Tesronto' and the improved 'Tesronto Imp' in the garden and have never noticed any difference between the two. Both provide nearly year-round color in our garden. Was there really any improvement?