



The JOURNEY to the MAINSTREAM

Visionary growers advocate for unusual species that fit beautifully



Burl Mostul is the owner of Rare Plant Research, and recently moved the business to a sprawling farm south of Oregon City. The retired psychologist loves to grow unusual plants in his greenhouses, such as this Aeonium 'Sunburst'. Most Aeoniums are native to the Canary Islands.

By Lorene Edwards Forkner

Did you ever think you'd see the day when Northwest nursery shelves would be stocked with tropical bananas, cannas, elephant ears and palms, alongside *Hebes*, *Grevillias*, *Corokias*, *Coprosmas* and other woody shrubs of the Southern Hemisphere?

Echeveria, aloes, cacti and other desert natives are the darlings of contemporary container design. At least one person opted for an amazing agave over the customary fuchsia basket for this year's Mother's Day gift.

These once-rare, obscure and little-known plants have entered mainstream horticulture to take their place alongside stalwart and familiar garden favorites. Whether they're trotting the globe, scoping a growing field or playing around with container compositions, inspired nursery professionals armed with keen eyes and a sense of adventure are ever-vigilant in their pursuit of new plants. We can thank them for the enormous task of bringing these plants to market.

The searches and the stories

Sometimes the stories behind new plants are as good as the plants. Burl Mostul of Rare Plant Research, the nursery that brought bananas to our borders, can tell many such tales.

"It was the early '90s, and I was attending a plant conference in British Columbia when a guy told a guy ... who told me about a local garden that was growing a hardy banana!" Mostul said.

The plant collector in Burl couldn't let that one get away, and the wholesale nursery owner in him saw a potential (and completely untapped) market. He went home with a piece of the fabled banana. Fast forward 15 years, and today the hardy banana, *Musa basjoo*, can be found on nearly every nursery table in our region. Fervent plant collectors, sophisticated designers, weekend gardeners, even little kids – it seems no one can resist the allure of the tropics or the eccentricity of planting this onetime strictly tropical native in our temperate backyards and containers.

Likewise, Mostul had a "marketing hunch" that drought-tolerant, tender and *almost* hardy succulents, with their bold, graphic forms, would capture the gardening public's imagination in the same way that the lush, sultry tropics had – a sort of climatic yin and yang of plant collecting. Bingo!

Whether you call it a horticultural sixth sense or shrewd business management, Mostul believes the ultimate success of a plant's introduction lies with the marketing, display and sell-through ability of nursery people and garden designers. These creative innovators experiment and illustrate the role the newcomers can play in the garden.

"It's all about how you use and combine the plants," Mostul said. "People have to be shown the possibilities."

Lucy Hardiman has vision, and her busy practice in Portland is proof. This garden designer with an artist's flair for color and composition is also a passionate plantswoman, always seeking out and evaluating new plants introduced domestically and abroad.



A couple of Mostul's favorite finds include Echeveria 'Afterglow' (left), a plant native to Mexico that loves full sun, and Euphorbia cotinifolia (above), which has the common name Caribbean copper plant.

Hardiman serves on the Perennial committee for Great Plant Picks program, an educational awards program dedicated to identifying outstanding plants for Pacific Northwest gardens.

Her considerable experience, support for garden trials, and commitment to educating the gardening public all come together here.

"The educational component cannot be understated," Hardiman said. "We have a shared responsibility to carefully select, introduce and market responsibly, not just interesting plants, but the know-how to succeed."

While she relishes a broad palette of plants to work with, Hardiman bemoans what she sees as a "glut of new plants which tends to dilute and distract from the good ones."

"So many introductions have become quickly passing commodities which flood the market before vanishing, only to make room for even newer, 'improved' varieties," she said.

And so she continues in her constant assessment of new plants'

garden performance, spreading the word and directing the sometimes-overwhelmed nursery consumer toward the "keepers."

An age of exploration

Sean Hogan, owner of Cistus Nursery on Sauvie Island outside Portland, Ore., delights in plants – literally thousands of them!

With a personal history of working in botanical gardens and a biologist's fascination with diversity of species, he has made this small, specialty retail nursery and its focus on plants that thrive in the Pacific Northwest his worldwide pulpit to preach the importance of matching plants with their proper growing conditions.

"It's wonderful to be a part of this age of plant exploration – a great ride – but I feel a sense of responsibility to introduce and market plants along with appropriate cultural background," he said. "Too many of us (retailers) have been negatively surprised or stung when a plant fails in the garden. That's

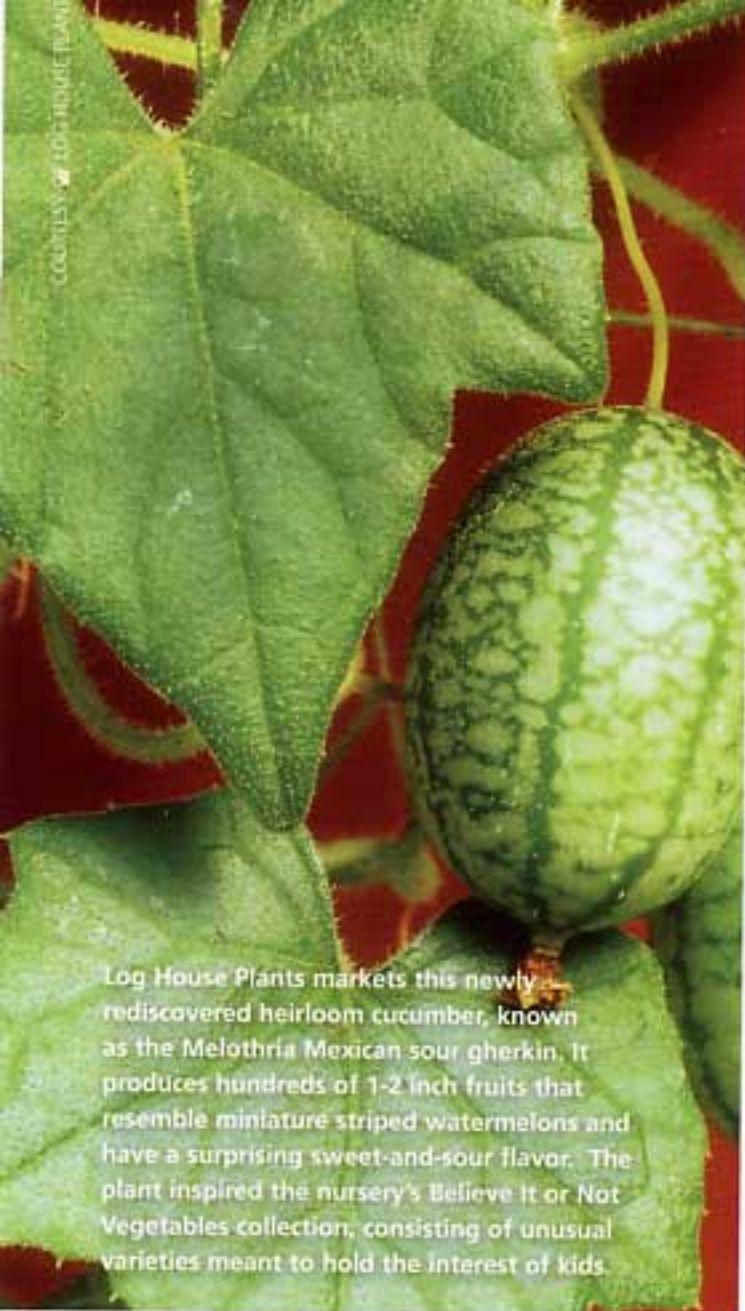
bad for the gardener and the retailer. It's about educating the customer – we're really selling them success."

When Sean is in plant hunting mode – as opposed to nursery owner mode or writer/educator and garden designer mode – he travels in temperate regions that share a "geological history" common with our regional growing conditions.

"Vegetation reflects the history of where we live with flora adapting to various limiting factors," he said.

What that means to nursery customers is fascinating, tempting, wonderful plants and the know-how to use them in the garden.

Hogan is always hunting for exciting new textures that stand out from plants already on the market. His goal is to capture the eye of the consumer and the imagination of designers and trend makers, or simply provide a better version of an existing plant with improved garden performance and hardiness.



Log House Plants markets this newly rediscovered heirloom cucumber, known as the *Melothria* Mexican sour gherkin. It produces hundreds of 1-2 inch fruits that resemble miniature striped watermelons and have a surprising sweet-and-sour flavor. The plant inspired the nursery's Believe It or Not Vegetables collection, consisting of unusual varieties meant to hold the interest of kids.

A strong proponent of developing the “regional narrative” of a landscape, Hogan promotes native plants and similarly adaptive exotics to support the unique environment and special flavor of Northwest gardens.

An adventure of discovery

Fresh out of college in the mid '70s, Alice Doyle and company began Log House Plants, a tiny wholesale nursery in Cottage Grove, Ore., with land, a donkey, and a log cabin built in 1929. When few small growers grew anything more adventurous than “meat and potato” annuals, and the industry standard was sold out by June 1, Log House quickly tapped into and nurtured what was to become a nationwide gardening bonanza.

“We feel we are on one big, glorious adventure with those that care about plants,” Doyle said. “Some say

the Northwest is a springboard for new ideas because of our nirvana-like growing conditions. Mostly, I think it is because we are brilliant people with high regard for our natural environment.”

Doyle credits sensitive nursery plant buyers who listened to the requests of their enthusiastic retail customers, pushing the market and prompting Log House to expand its offerings.

Early on, Doyle mined foreign seed catalogs for interesting and “new” plants she could introduce to the American market. But the past 30-some years of travel, correspondence and no small amount of pestering and forbearance has seen the development of her most precious crop yet, her “network.”

This is how Doyle describes the generous community of plantsmen, seedsmen, backyard breeders,

Picks from the PROS

It isn't hard to get growers and landscapers to talk about plants. The tough part is getting them to narrow down their list of favorites to just a handful. Here are some favorites:

Alice Doyle
Log House Plants
Cottage Grove, Ore.



Jasmine 'Salsa' – New leaves emerge coppery-orange, turning creamy yellow and green as they mature. At just 12–15 inches tall, this recent addition to our Tropicals collection makes a wild, multicolored ground cover for a partly shaded bed. Lift and overwinter indoors.

Cordyline 'Southern Splendor' – Hot pink margins line dark gray leaves on upright palm-like plants that are hardy to 15 degrees. Dramatic new 'Statuesque' variety also produces panicles of large, fragrant white flowers.



Delphinium 'Chocolate' – Tall, graceful spikes with flowers in blends of deep brown, lighter cocoa, and ivory, each bloom veined, picoteed, or stippled – a vision of sweet creamy white chocolate with smooth milk and rich dark chocolate swirled throughout.

Tagetes nosento 'Lime Green' – An exceptional new marigold, intended for professional cultivation, that combines odorless blooms, innovative color, and outstanding vase life. The plump lime-green flowers on sturdy stems last up to three weeks after cutting.



Sean Hogan
Cistus Nursery
Sauvie Island, Ore.



Yucca rostrata – This is probably the most handsome of the hardy yuccas for the Pacific Northwest. Its stiff, grey-blue leaves form a halo around a slowly elongating trunk. Plant it in full sun and well-drained soil for a happy plant. Add a little summer water for faster growth.

Nolina 'La Siberica' – From seed collected at 8,000 feet in La Siberia, Mexico, this plant has a symmetrical whorl of long, graceful leaves. It is a handsome plant, eventually developing a nice trunk up to 6 feet tall. Best in sun with little summer water.



Quercus hypoleucooides (Silver Oak) – This is our favorite oak since first sighting it in Arizona in the 1980s. Exquisite trees, 25 feet tall by 15 feet wide. Narrow leaves, shiny and leathery with dazzling silver undersides, can age to maroon in the cold. Fast growing when young. This plant does well in direct sunlight and well-drained soil.

Cistus 'Snow Fire' – A reasonably new cultivar from the United Kingdom, raised by Eric Sammons. It features five deep maroon patches at the base of its wide, overlapping, pure white petals. It spreads to 2 feet high and 5 feet wide, and loves lean soils and dry summers. It gives off a rather pleasant scent on warm nights.





Bananas growing in the Northwest? Burl Mostul learned it was true in the early 1990s when he encountered a grower in British Columbia that was growing *Musa basjoo*, the hardy banana. Mostul had to have one, so he took it home. Today, the hardy banana is commonly seen in retail nurseries, illustrating how key growers can help popularize unusual plants.

a floral structure and sees the complete surrender to its environment."

On a practical level, Hinkley focuses on foliage and texture. "We all like flowers, of course; however, it is the foliage that is going to be the most enduring attribute," he said.

Native or exotic, at home or abroad, the world is a fertile garden, ripe for exploration in the discerning eyes of this knowledgeable gardener. The industry has countless horticultural wonders to his credit.

What's next and who has the pulse of consumer desires? What will be the next horticultural "hot thing"?

Mostul believes in getting new plants in front of the public's eye to gauge their reaction.

To this end, Rare Plant Research is always a favorite stop at public and trade garden shows, where they feature their newest and most promising introductions. ©

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colleagues, mentors and kindred plant fanatics she's come to cherish. It is their constant and lively global discussion of new and interesting plants that fuels her passion and has resulted in many exciting introductions.

Where once chocolate cosmos was merely a quirky Mexican native spied by the late Kevin Nicolay, now this luscious-smelling, mahogany-flowered dahlia relative is a staple of summer.

Nicolay shared with Doyle, Doyle is good at growing and marketing, and the rest is history.

Today, talk of local, organic and sustainable food is on everyone's lips and strictly ornamental borders are making room for herb gardens, berry patches and veggie beds.

Growers are responding with a broad range of farm stand favorites, bred for bountiful backyard plots and the phrase "Ornamental Edibles" has entered the horticultural lexicon.

It doesn't get more local than your own backyard, and Log House Plants has long been the source of many heirloom, medicinal, and classic vegetable starts, offering a vast selection to adventurous gardeners and cooks.

Doyle has a brilliant knack for marketing and education. The Log House Plants Web site includes a comprehensive catalog that reads like the most enticing plant catalog. The site features a weekly e-newsletter that goes out to anyone who subscribes – a minor miracle to pull off in the midst of the busy spring season.

Innovative labeling systems on their plants are attractive on shelves, and the tags are chock-full of valuable cultural information, recipes, and "backstory."

Ripe for exploration

No article on 21st century Northwest plant collectors and their contributions would be complete without input from Dan Hinkley, a true senior statesman of contemporary horticulture.

When asked, "Why do we grow plants?" Hinkley responded, "I am motivated by awe for the process of life. It boggles the mind when one examines