



History OF THE Flower Fields AT Carlsbad Ranch

They are world renowned, but rooted in Carlsbad.

WRITTEN BY WENDY HINMAN

Spring surprises Carlsbad. It doesn't have the slow creep of a Midwestern thaw, but a sudden awareness of grasses gone verdant green. Brown rows that slept all winter startle us with color.

Nowhere else does this awakening amaze us quite like The Flower Fields. One day we're just headed home on the 5 Freeway and the next we're distracted by hills of yellows, reds and oranges. The Flower Fields at Carlsbad Ranch are an annual swath of Carlsbad's agrarian history from a time when Carlsbad was known as the flower capital of the world.

THE CROP

The Tecolote Giant Ranunculus flowers are the reason for today's color. They are Carlsbad's most successful flower story. Their bold hues bursting forth every spring are as iconic in Carlsbad as the old Twin Inns, the power plant and the beach. The 1920s saw the first buds of the flower market in North County. Gladiolas, poinsettias and birds-of-paradise are some of the other big cash crops with a rich history here. The flower market dipped during World War II when most crops went to the war effort, but reached full bloom in the '60s and '70s.

The first ranunculuses in Carlsbad were grown by Luther Gage. A member of the buttercup family—the flower, not Gage—the original stock was yellow with a single level of petals. They are grown from seed for the bulbs. That is why they sprout up, bloom and then look like they are left to wither; the bulb is what the farmer is cultivating.

Retired ranunculus farmer John Frazee says, "They are ideal for Southern California—cool nights, but not freezing. Ranunculuses aren't affected by too much. They don't get fungus like gladiolas." He adds they're not much bugged by bugs either. And, "You can get 10 to 15 blooms off one seed. From bulbs, especially the larger ones, you can get up to a hundred flowers. That's the beauty of ranunculus."

THE FARMERS

Frazee's grandfather, Frank Frazee, was barely getting by dry-farming lima beans when Luther Gage suggested he switch to freesias. Farming in the '20s and '30s was a hard-scraped life. Dry farming depended on the rain. The market and the weather favored flowers. Edwin Frazee, John Frazee's father, was Gage's foreman and, in 1928, Gage taught him how to grow ranunculuses from seed and business boomed. Frank dropped out of the third grade to farm. Edwin dropped out as a sophomore to farm.

"Farming, it's all I ever wanted to do," John Frazee says. And other than slinging the Blade Tribune onto porches from a bike, it's all he ever did. But it also ignited his teenage mind. At the end of the '50s (he graduated in 1960) a high school kid wanted two things, a car and a girl.

His first field was in south Oceanside. His dad said, "If you go and clean that up, you can have it." He enlisted neighbor kids to help and went to work raising gladiolas. Once the harvest was in, and labor and fertilizer paid for, "it was a pretty tidy profit." Frazee bought a Ford convertible and an engagement ring for his high school crush, Dianne Cilley. (He married her in 1961). He was also hooked on the family flower business. "Dirt runs through his veins," Dianne says. Adds John, "I learned farming since I could walk, mostly from my dad. Grandad taught me how to shoot a gun, set a fishing line and have a good time."

Gage and Edwin Frazee began with a mother stock of yellow, single-row ranunculus petals. They selected the best seeds and the unusual ones every year so that over time "the double" developed and new colors emerged. The doubles are the multi-layers of petals of the ranunculus grown today. Gage dubbed them the Tecolote Giant Ranunculus. Tecolote is Spanish for "owl" and there was a plethora of small, burrowing owls in south Carlsbad



a

a) John Frazee restored this 1931 Model A (photo courtesy of the Frazees); b) Violet Legerwood, wife of Carlsbad's "seed man" enjoyed the blooms (photo courtesy of Carlsbad History Room); c) Luther Gage (photo courtesy of The Flower Fields); d) four generations of Frazees in their fields (photos courtesy of the Frazees).



c



b



d



a) The Flower Fields draws tourists and locals every spring (photo courtesy of The Flower Fields); b) in the '70s the ranunculus ruled Carlsbad's southern horizon; c) an aerial view shows The Flower Fields in bloom near Interstate 5 (photo courtesy of Carlsbad History Room).



back then. A flower copyright can be held for 20 years. Gage filed it in 1935, Edwin Frazee in 1955, John Frazee in 1975.

"We moved to Ponto in 1958," Frazee says of the ranunculus-growing business. "Our biggest years, the late '70s, we had 350 acres." South of Cannon Road to Batiquitos Lagoon, the colors captured Carlsbad's collective imagination. There was a time when you could stand on the crest of the hill where Poinsettia Lane now crosses Paseo Del Norte and see nothing but flowers stretching to the sea.

THE LEGACY

The late '50s and early '60s also saw the completion of the Interstate 5 freeway. It cut through Frazee's flower fields and caught the attention of visitors flowing from L.A. to San Diego. By the time Frazee retired in 1993, one thing was clear: The new flower business was agri-tourism and cut flowers brought more immediate revenue than the bulbs.

Today, The Flower Fields are owned and operated by the Ecke Family. The Eckes are also a longtime flower-growing family, best known for poinsettias. In the '60s if you asked a kid what her dad did and she said he grows flowers, you could tell the family by the flower.

The Flower Fields at Carlsbad Ranch grow 50 acres of ranunculuses and offer many ways to enjoy them and ponder what the dirt beneath us is capable of. While a walk or a tractor ride through the ranunculuses is the main event, there is a sweet-pea maze, an artist garden, plus cymbidiums and poinsettias on display.

People from all over the world, the state and the other side of Carlsbad come every spring to enjoy the flowers. Besides filling the senses, there are sciences and arts to learn from. One reason the fields flourish still is because they are deeply rooted in our history. They say to guests, this is us.

The Flower Fields at Carlsbad Ranch are open from March 1 to May 10. They are located at 5704 Paseo Del Norte. For more information on admission, special events, attractions and more, call 760.431.0352 or visit theflowerfields.com. From April 9 to 19, Visit Carlsbad hosts Petal to Plate, a celebration of all things floral at local restaurants, resorts, spas and breweries. For more information, visit visitcarlsbad.com/petaltoplate/.



Guests who come to see The Flower Fields can also take part in a variety of special events (photo courtesy of The Flower Fields).