

# PROTEA PARADISE

**Where do proteas get that trendy wild look?  
It's a story of origins—from 90 million years ago  
right up until today.**

Text and photography by Bruce Wright

Although they may just recently have been swarming social media in shots of floral designs, proteas have been around for a very long time. The large and extremely diverse family is known to have originated at a time when much of the Earth's landmass had amalgamated into one supercontinent. Later, sections of the supercontinent drifted apart and formed the continents we know today—which is why we find members of the wide-ranging protea family native to regions as far apart as Australia, South America and South Africa.

These are regions neither temperate nor tropical. Typically dry and hot, they have triggered in their flower offspring a wild diversity of adaptations to these harsh conditions. Within that diversity, however, certain characteristics do tend to recur, among them

leathery leaves, waxy and furry textures, and flower forms of complex symmetry, often bristling with a multitude of graceful, slender styles (upward extensions of the floral ovary).

The protea family includes a number of botanical genera that contribute splendidly to today's cut-flower market, including banksias, leucadendrons (like Safari Sunset), leucospermums (pincushions), and more. There is only one genus *Protea* (think king and queen proteas, or the "mink" varieties tipped with dark fur), but florists and their suppliers tend to call all of these proteas.

Outliers with a rough beauty reminiscent of their natural habitats, proteas are unlike most other cut flowers in that they are grown outdoors, and not even in hoop houses but under open skies, often on steep slopes where other crops could hardly be

cultivated. These are not hothouse flowers that can be tamed into a predictable and consistent sameness. Seasonal by nature, their availability is subject to the whims of nature. Growers and buyers have to learn to roll with this.

Fortunately, since proteas ship well, a variety that is out of season in California or Hawaii—primary suppliers to North American markets—can often be obtained from growers in the southern hemisphere, where the seasons are reversed. Today, certain proteas are also grown year-round in Colombia (see page 45) and elsewhere in South and Central America.

As a leader in the field, located in southern California, Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers sometimes brings in imported proteas to make sure they can offer customers a balanced assortment. The



**HILLSIDE HARVEST** Growing anything on a steep hillside is a challenge, for obvious reasons. "The guys who harvest the flowers have to dig their heels into the soil," says Resendiz Brothers' Tracy Easter, "balancing bundles of cut flowers on their backs." On the other hand, by planting some of the same crop lower down where it's warmer, some higher up where it's cooler, Mel Resendiz (above) can stagger the harvest and stretch the season for that crop. And the soil is good for proteas and similar flowers and foliage: sandy, loamy, and rich in minerals. Asked, "What is the hardest thing about being a flower farmer?," Mel answers, "What's hardest is, you don't own the farm, the farm owns you. You have to be here 24-7. You watch the weather," he adds, laughing softly, "and you sleep like a rabbit with your eyes open."

farm's owners and management team are active in the International Protea Association, a professional group with members in 16 countries. Among other benefits, "we've been able to trade cuttings with growers from other countries as a way to keep expanding and experimenting with new varieties," says Resendiz Brothers' Diana Roy. It's amazing, isn't it, to think that genetic strains that parted company 90 million years ago, when a supercontinent divided, might be in that way reunited on the same southern California farm?

A visit to Resendiz Brothers is a treat for any flower lover—as seen on the following pages. Short of making the trip, you can find a wealth of additional photos and useful information about proteas on the Resendiz Brothers website, [www.resendizbrothers.com](http://www.resendizbrothers.com).



WATERWORKS At Resendiz Brothers, irrigation pipes water the hillside crops, including *Serruria florida*, often called blushing bride (although Blushing Bride is properly the name of a mostly white variety; the one seen above and below is Sugar & Spice). Two other relatively new crops are the aptly named flannel flower (at right) and Aussie bells (below right).



**BIRDS, ANTS, AND BABOONS** "When pincushions develop their seeds, they have a very interesting ecology," says Tracy Easter at Resendiz Brothers. He talks fast, fascinated with the story: "The seed is in the center of the bloom. The bird comes along and he's looking for nectar. He sticks his beak into the bloom itself, and while he's doing that, he gathers pollen. He moves onto the next flower, transfers the pollen, and that's how the flowers get viable seeds. Now, once the seed forms, it's really attractive to ants and even to baboons. The baboons will rip the head off and eat the seeds. But the ants can't do that. The seeds are way bigger than the ants; they're about the size of a popcorn kernel, so one alone can't carry it. It's so attractive to them that one ant will go back and get four or five buddies, and together they'll drag the seed back to their cave and eat the coating off. The coating has protein. Once they're done, they throw the rest away in their little trash chamber. The seed will then sit there for the next 20 or so years, according to the fire cycle in Africa. The fire comes through and wipes out the plant, turns it to ash, and whenever that first winter rain comes along—I think every 10 years they get a nice really heavy one—it washes whatever chemical component is in the ash down and it activates the seed. So, the plant has to be destroyed in the process, but then it rises again"—like a phoenix.

## CARE TIPS FOR PROTEAS AND THEIR COUSINS

Hardy flowers and foliage in the protea family last even longer and look even more beautiful with attention to these points.

- Proteas and related flowers do last better than some others out of water, *after* they have been properly conditioned and re-hydrated. But it's still important, as soon as they arrive in the shop, to re-cut stem ends as usual and place them in water with flower food added.
- Proteas and related flowers are not tropical flowers, which should never be refrigerated. But they are also not temperate flowers, like roses and carnations, which do best at 34-36 degrees Fahrenheit. Proteas prefer an in-between temperature. Placing them in a floral refrigerator at 40 degrees Fahrenheit and 85% humidity is ideal.
- Keep proteas in a well-lit area (artificial light is OK). Think of sunny Australia and South Africa: these are flowers that need plenty of light. Without it, black spots may appear on leaves and leaf tips.



**BANKSIA BARBECUE** Most cut-flower crops are propagated in one of two ways: via tissue culture in a lab, or from rooted cuttings. Both are faster and cheaper than growing new plants from seeds. Both methods also produce offspring that are genetically identical to the parent plants—which is what growers usually want. Some cut-flower varieties, however, can't be propagated from cuttings. Most banksia species fall into this category, as Tracy tells: "Last year Mel said to me, 'Tracy, we're going to have a banksia barbecue.' I asked if I should bring the

beer. But no—this is how we germinate the banksia seeds," in a way that replicates the natural conditions under which the plant reproduces. "The banksia pods are basically tinder, because the styles dry out and get crispy, just waiting for a fire. You set them on the barbecue, and the moment one catches fire, you leave it for five seconds or so, then pull it out and blow the fire out. You see the little lips on the dried pod? They open up, and it jettisons the seed, which is paper thin and flies away on the wind to start a new plant."



**THE SEX LIFE OF LEUCADENDRONS** Leucadendrons are also known as conebushes—a common name that becomes very clear when you look at a sprig of *Leucadendron nobile* (above). At left, Tracy holds a bright red variety of leucadendron; this bunch happens to have multiple heads on each stem. Usually leucadendrons are sold in bunches of 10 stems, each with a single head, but they may also be marketed as sprays, in bunches that are sold by weight. You might think the single-headed leucadendrons are perhaps like disbud chrysanthemums, in which the laterals are trimmed away to produce a single large flower—but no. Rather, with leucadendrons the sprays result from trimming. "The rule is that for every cut I make, I get two offshoots, maybe four," says Tracy. He offers another little-known fact about leucadendrons: unlike most flowering, seed-producing plants, they are dioecious, meaning that each individual plant is either male or female. By contrast, most angiosperms (flower- and seed-producing plants) produce flowers with both male and female organs. You can tell the sex of a leucadendron stem from the cone. These stems, with rough-textured cones, are male; the female cones are smooth like an egg.

## BLOOMING NOW AT RESENDIZ BROTHERS PROTEA GROWERS

Photos courtesy of Resendiz Brothers, [www.resendizbrothers.com](http://www.resendizbrothers.com)

At Resendiz Brothers, the seasonal harvest changes from month to month—but there is always something available that's exotic, eye-catching and long-lasting. Here are just a few of the many kinds of proteas and other flowers likely to be available in May.



**LEUCADENDRONS JUBILEE CROWN AND PISA** When you think of leucadendrons, do you think of Safari Sunset? The genus *Leucadendron* has some 80 species, along with numerous subspecies and cultivars, many of which bear spectacular flowers. Jubilee Crown, in a rich raspberry color, offers a good example of why leucadendrons are also known by the common name "conebushes." Another conebush, Pisa, stands out for its lime green and creamy yellow coloring. It generally comes as a spray, with more than one flower head to a stem.



**LEPTOSPERMUM ROTUNDIFOLIUM** Leptospermums are not members of the protea family, but like many proteas they are mostly native to South Africa—and like proteas, they flourish in southern California. Like a cross between heather and waxflower, they offer tall spikes thick with buds and five-petaled blossoms. Usually they are available from California from February to May.



**LEUCOSPERMUMS FLAME GIANT, SUNKIST, AND HIGH GOLD**

Better known as pincushions or simply pins, leucospermums have enjoyed a surge of popularity of late. With that surge, fascinating new varieties have begun to appear on the market, many from a breeding program at the University of Hawaii. Beyond the traditional orange, you will find true red and yellow pincushions, even rose pink. Some varieties change color as they go through different stages of development. Reflexum varieties open all the way and even further, so that the styles, instead of pointing up and curving in, stretch out and down for a completely different look. In some pincushions the ribbon-like petals are prominent; fuzzy white hairs, likewise, may be more or less conspicuous, depending on the variety and the stage of maturity.

Spring is generally a good time to find a wide variety of pincushions from California. Check out the leucospermum page on [www.resendizbrothers.com](http://www.resendizbrothers.com).



**STARTING FRESH** Flower growers always need new plants, whether to replace mature plants that are no longer productive, or varieties that are no longer in demand—or, in the case of Resendiz Brothers, to keep expanding. Mel recently acquired another 43 acres of hillside, which will accommodate another 1700 plants. Many growers purchase their new plants from a professional propagator. Or, if they do their own propagating, they do it from cuttings, looking for a fast turnaround and to replicate the existing genetic code. The folks at Resendiz Brothers, on the other hand, are on the lookout for interesting variations. “A lot of times, especially with waxflower, if you plant different kinds in the same area, you’ll get beautiful new varieties that sprout up by themselves, because the bees cross-pollinate them,” says Resendiz’s Diana Roy. “Mel does the same thing with leucadendrons.” So, the shaded propagation area at Resendiz Brothers is filled with young plants that might be propagated from cuttings, but they might also be collected as seedlings from the farm itself.

Waxflower, of course, is not a kind of protea, but it hails from Australia and grows well in the same environment. Have you ever looked carefully at a waxflower bud that’s about to pop open? It’s covered with a cap that is like a thin layer of wax. When the cap pops off, you get the bloom. Under certain weather conditions, all the caps pop off at once, and you get a crop that floods the market.



**ON THE PREMISES** Fresh bouquets and wreaths—like this one just finished, by Mel’s brother Porfirio Resendiz—are made right on the farm, with flowers and foliages that change seasonally. Under the right conditions a wreath made with proteas can dry beautifully in place.



**BEFORE AND AFTER** The largest and arguably the most spectacular of all proteas, the king protea (*Protea cynaroides*) has lately been having an Instagram moment, starring in bridal bouquets. Indeed, it is almost a bridal bouquet all by itself. It is available in pink, red and white varieties. Before they open up, king proteas look like giant candles. Here is the same king variety on the bush and (below) just harvested, by Mel himself.





**HAND-TIED** Not every flower farmer is also a designer—but go to any edition of Fun N Sun, the biannual convention of CalFlowers (the California Association of Flower Growers and Shippers), and you'll see an always-spectacular arrangement created by Mel Resendiz. After completing this hand-tied bouquet, Mel stood it on the table: as sturdy and well balanced as if it came from an old-time Dutch bloemenwinkel.

