



CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE

He bet the farm on an unfamiliar flower—
now protea is a breakout star

Story by Shannon Springmeyer • Photos by Rob Andrew

On a patchwork of some 15 parcels of hilly land with rocky, dry soil in northern San Diego County, Ismael “Mel” Resendiz has carved out a floral paradise. His farm, clinging to steep, remote hillsides and linked to civilization with narrow dirt roads, many of which Resendiz himself built, defies convention. So does its signature product, the otherworldly but undeniably lovely protea.

With big, bold blooms, bright colors and sturdy petals owing to their prehistoric lineage, proteas make a striking impression in arrangements. Taking their name after the shape-shifting Greek god Proteus, the more than 1,500 species of the *Proteacea* family come in myriad forms. They are a relative newcomer on the cut flower scene, but word is getting out about the uniqueness of proteas and their relatives, such as tendril-studded leucospermum “pincushions,” bottle-brush-like banksia and leathery leucadendrons. They’re quickly gaining ground as the focal point of choice in bouquets and wreaths.

Falling for flowers

Resendiz said the boom in interest in protea he’s noted during the past five years is affirmation for the

long and difficult road he’s taken to reach success.

Resendiz never set out to be a flower farmer. In 1978, he was harvesting cotton and sugar cane in Mexico, when friends returned from stints working on U.S. farms with enough cash to buy pickup trucks.

“Working down there, I could hardly afford to buy a bike,” Resendiz said.

So he found a job at Zorro Protea Farms in Rancho Santa Fe in San Diego County. Still a teenager, Resendiz didn’t know much about the flowers. It wasn’t just him—many people had never seen a protea. Native to South Africa, proteas were first commercially cultivated there as cut flowers in the 1910s. Starting in the 1960s, Southern California growers recognized the opportunity to cultivate the exotic blooms. The Mediterranean climate and acidic soils in parts of San Diego and Santa Barbara counties offered ideal growing conditions.

Most varieties of protea need good drainage, making hillsides the perfect growing sites. In fact, the flowers allow the cultivation of land that would be inhospitable and impractical for growing other types of crops, Resendiz said. They’re also water-friendly, requiring irrigation only about once a week.

Mel Resendiz of Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers takes time from his busy schedule running his flower farm to arrange a bouquet of king protea, pincushion, banksia and other flowers from the *Proteacea* family.



Resendiz Brothers employees Jose Alvarez, left, and Felipe Gonzalez harvest pincushion protea flowers at the San Diego County farm, which grows more than 200 varieties year-round.



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ON EARTH

Source: San Diego Zoo

Resendiz learned how to tend the plants, graft, cross-pollinate and collect seed from Zorro's farm manager, pioneering California protea farmer Howard Asper Sr. Along the way, something unexpected happened.

"I fell in love with the proteas," Resendiz said.

He eventually worked his way up from farmhand to farm manager. When Zorro's owners sold their land to real estate developers, Resendiz decided he wanted to stay in the business. In 1999, he formed Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers, which he runs with his brothers Porfirio, Raul and Ramon.

Forging a path

It was a challenge initially to find buyers for the still unfamiliar proteas they grew, Resendiz said. For years, they struggled to cover production costs.

Diana Roy, business manager for Resendiz Brothers since 2001, said it was a painstaking process to build recognition of the flower and cultivate a market for it in the U.S. They invested in high-quality photography of the flowers, traveled to trade shows to educate floral professionals on the varieties available, made connections and built a social media presence. Eventually, the flowers began to catch on.

"I found that because what we grow is so unique and

unusual, if we're able to design something beautiful and photograph it and put it out there, we actually find ourselves changing trends," Roy said. "Years ago, you wouldn't even see these kinds of things and now they're becoming what they're telling everybody is the 'in' thing."

Proteas are increasingly sought after by designers and customers looking for something different, said Certified Floral Designer and industry expert Keith White.

"It's the 'cool stuff' in the design," he said. "People are always asking questions about it. It's amazing the influence that (proteas) have had on the whole floral design industry."

White said he's had a passion for designing with proteas for more than 20 years. He likes their unique form and texture. They boast superior longevity as cut flowers, staying fresh and attractive for two weeks or more, and are available year-round. He used them extensively in designs he created for the 2018 Rose Parade.

White, creative director for the "American Floral Trends Forecast 2018-2019," said the publication features proteas prominently. As more retail florists and wire services such as FTD feature the flower in their everyday designs, more people become familiar with proteas, White said.

Field to vase

"The demand has been growing and growing," Resendiz said. "There's not enough proteas in California to meet all the demand."

Resendiz, who is also president of the California Protea Association, said protea farming in the state has come a long way since its early days, when there were fewer than 200 acres planted. Today, there are more than 3,000 acres of protea farmed from Santa Barbara to San Diego, the center of North American protea production.

His own farm, which began as a single parcel of 10 acres, now boasts 250. Resendiz grows more than 200 varieties in the protea family, harvesting 12 months of the year and shipping to more than 250 wholesale customers in the U.S., Korea, Canada and Japan. Resendiz also sells bouquets directly to customers through the company's online retail site, The Protea Store.

The growing demand for proteas marks a bright spot for the California cut flower business. California remains the nation's top producer of cut flowers, supplying about 78 percent of the domestic wholesale value. But according to the California Cut Flower Commission, the state's farmers have faced tough competition during the past few decades from South American producers, who pay a fraction of the employee costs and aren't held to the same regulatory environment and government oversight. In a marketplace now dominated by imported flowers, proteas help offer a distinctive, California-grown alternative.

Resendiz Brothers participates in the Certified

American Grown program, aimed at raising awareness about the origin of cut flowers. In April, the farm hosted an American Grown Field to Vase Dinner, one stop on a nationwide tour that highlights the importance of supporting American flower farmers.

"You have a lot of people who prefer the freshest, highest-quality products, whether it's food that they eat or something that's on their table," said Roy, who is past chair of the California Cut Flower Commission. "When I buy gladiolus or lilies, I make sure they're California-grown, because I want to make sure that my fellow flower farmers are staying in business alongside of me."

When customers choose California-grown flowers, they can feel good about the choice, Roy said: The flowers are fresh, high-quality, grown to exacting standards and travel the shortest distance to get to their vase.

For Resendiz, feeling good is what flowers are all about. It's what he loves most about his business.

"Every time I have new people come (to the farm), I give them a bouquet of proteas. It makes them happy," he said. 🌿

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