





Petals on Parade

Floral growers have a national stage to show off their best blooms.

BY LISA DUCHENE



June and Rene Van Wingerden grow gerbera daisies at their farm—some of which end up at the annual Rose Parade.

PARADE FLOATS (3): LINDA BLUE PHOTOGRAPHY; DAISIES: BRANDX PICTURES/PUNCHSTOCK; JUNE AND RENE: MIKE FURLONG









Mel Resendiz (far left) shows off his protea flowers, prized for Rose Parade floats because they hold up so well in the Southern California sun. The flowers used to decorate the Cal Poly float (second from left) and the grand marshal vehicles (second from right) are all certified CA Grown. Before roses are added to the Cal Poly float, volunteers trim each one and place it in a water tube (far right).

MEL RESENDIZ: PHOTO COURTESY OF MIRACLEGRO; PARADE FLOATS (3): LINDA BLUE PHOTOGRAPHY

June Van Wingerden's family raised corn and cotton when she was growing up in California's San Joaquin Valley. Every New Year's Day, they watched the flower-saturated Rose Parade floats creep along Pasadena's Colorado Boulevard.

June and her husband, Rene, now own Ocean Breeze Farms in Carpinteria on California's central coast. They grow gerbera daisies in greenhouses on 27 acres, and field-grown mums, avocados and cucumbers on a few more. About an hour away, their son grows for Ocean Breeze on another 12 acres in Nipomo.

Every day at work and home, the Van Wingerdens see the ocean and gorgeous blooms. Walking into a greenhouse full of flowers is cheerful and pleasing, June says.

Ocean Breeze Farms is one of about a half-dozen California flower operations owned by members of June and Rene's family. June's flower-farming life has given her a fresh perspective on her New Year's Day tradition.

"The Rose Parade was supposed to show you the flowers that were growing in California," June says. "When you listen to the parade through a flower grower's ears, you don't learn anything about California flowers anymore, even though that's how it started."

In 1890, scientist and author Charles Frederick Holder led the effort to showcase California's blooming abundance as winter gripped the northern United States. Fellow members of his Valley Hunt Club decorated their carriages with California-grown blooms before games of chariot races, jousting, footraces, polo and tug of war. Football came later, and became a Tournament of Roses tradition starting in 1916.

Today, 700,000 spectators line the parade route to see about 40 floats decorated only with flowers, foliage and other natural materials. But while the flowers used to come only from local farms, the changing U.S. flower market has affected the source of parade blooms.

Industry advocates say 80 percent of flowers sold in the U.S. these days are imported from South America. Kasey Cronquist, the California Cut Flower Commission CEO, says an increase in imported flowers has led to the decline in the number of California flowers at the parade.

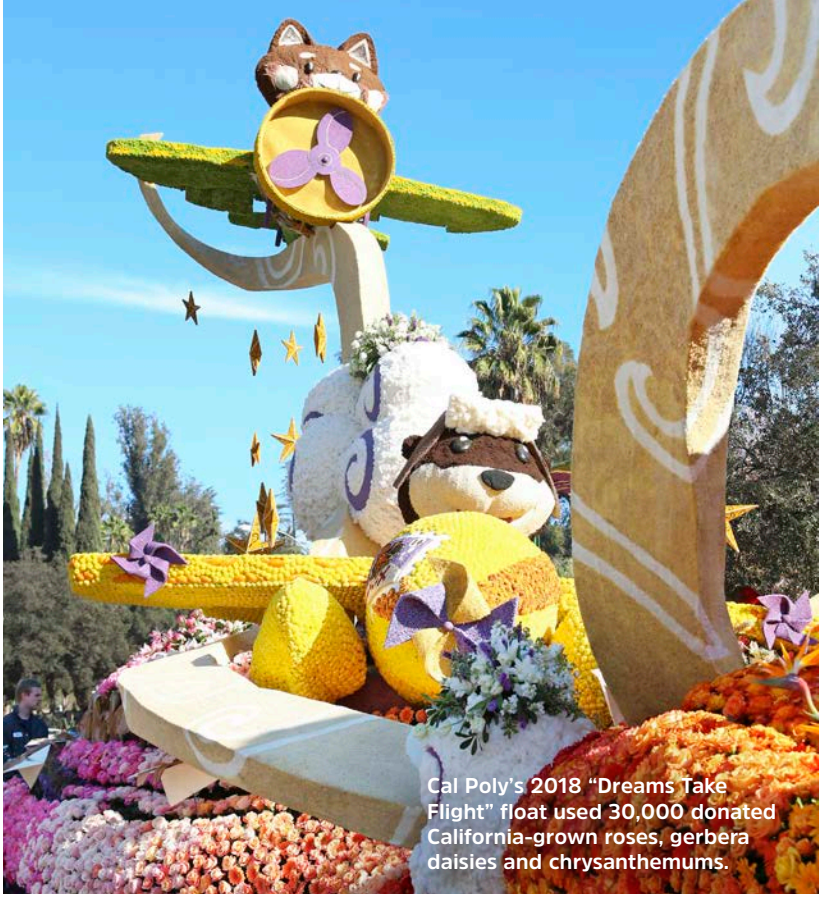
To return some of the spotlight to California's blooms, the Van Wingerdens support the California Cut Flower Commission's efforts to certify floats as a part of the CA Grown program. They take pride in their family heritage and in an operation that employs 100 people, including extended family.

Since 2012, floats with at least 85 percent California-grown flowers can be certified and bear the CA Grown logo. "It was an untold story," Kasey says.

The flowers draping vehicles carrying the parade's VIPs have all been certified CA Grown since 2013, and in 2018, for the first time, only local flowers adorned the parade's horses and the Pasadena police motorcycles leading the parade.

The Cut Flower Commission also partners with the students at California Polytechnic State University to certify their floats as CA Grown. Since 1949, Cal Poly students have designed, sourced all-natural materials for, and built their own floats for the Rose Parade. California farmers donate flowers—grown to the students' requests when possible—and host student field trips to their farms.

About 30,000 donated California-grown roses, gerbera daisies, kale, callas, irises and chrysanthemums gave vibrant color to the larger-than-life baby animals flying homemade



Cal Poly's 2018 "Dreams Take Flight" float used 30,000 donated California-grown roses, gerbera daisies and chrysanthemums.

LINDA BLUE PHOTOGRAPHY

airplanes aboard Cal Poly's "Dreams Take Flight" float in 2018. Ocean Breeze Farms donated all the green button chrysanthemums as well as some of the gerbera daisies for the award-winning float.

Another flower farm, Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers, located in Fallbrook, also has supplied blooms for the Cal Poly floats. Resendiz Brothers has grown protea blooms and foliage for parade floats and vehicles for 10 years.

Proteas, native to South Africa, thrive in the nearby Mediterranean-like climate. They require patience to grow; they take a few years to produce viable blooms from seeds, grafting or cuttings. But Diana Roy, business manager for Resendiz Brothers, says they're worth it, and they work well for float-building. "If it's warm, the proteas hold up, and when you're going down Colorado Boulevard they still look like they just came out of the field," she says.

As this story was being written, growers were still waiting to learn what the Cal Poly students required for 2019's "Far Out Frequencies" float, which will feature huge astronauts jamming with green aliens in a tribute to both music and outer space.

Parade day is unforgettable. Summer Blanco, a fourth-year Cal Poly botany major, says, "On New Year's Day, you're sitting with family and friends and see that float turn the corner. All that hard work—everyone is cheering and screaming. It's an awesome experience."

It's pretty awesome for growers, too, says Diana. In the days leading up to the parade, Resendiz Brothers owner Ismael "Mel" Resendiz, the Van Wingerdens and other state flower farmers hand out CA Grown stickers and answer questions from visitors who come to see the Cal Poly float. Rene finds that most visitors don't know much about the origin of the parade's flowers.

Diana thinks the parade should be on everyone's bucket list. "I can't think of a better way to spend the first day of the year, to be surrounded by so much beauty and so much energy," she says. "Flowers make people happy."

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