

# PACIFIC HORTICULTURE

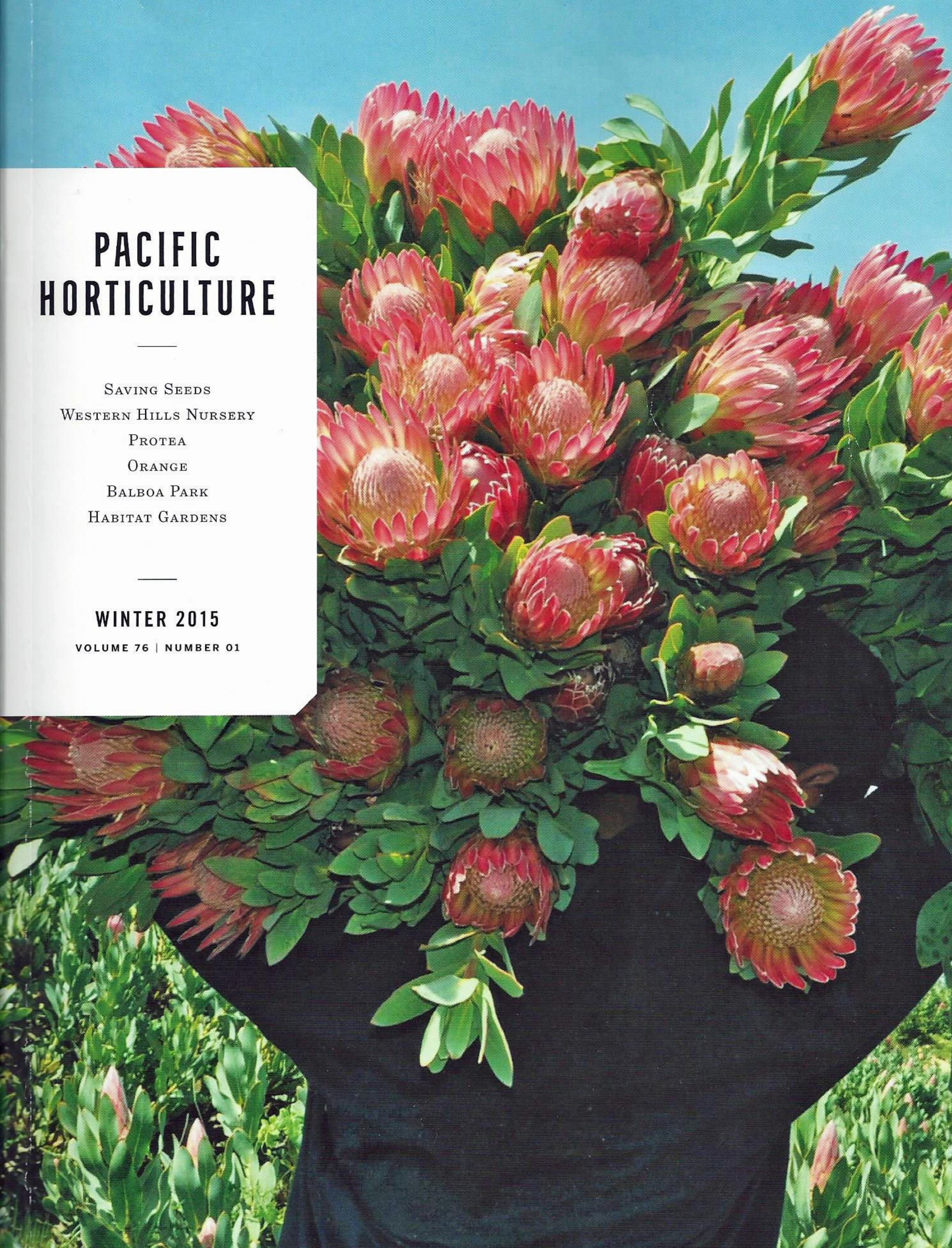
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SAVING SEEDS  
WESTERN HILLS NURSERY  
PROTEA  
ORANGE  
BALBOA PARK  
HABITAT GARDENS

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Coastal conditions in Southern California are conducive to producing a colorful and lasting harvest.





A steep hillside in Fallbrook, California, provides ideal growing conditions for cultivating protea.

# Protea

## *Cultivating a Regal Cut Flower*

BY DEBRA PRINZING

**ALL PHOTOS ARE COURTESY OF RESENDIZ BROTHERS PROTEA GROWERS**

ISMAEL “MEL” RESENDIZ CONSIDERS the protea to be flower royalty.

Protea and its South African and Australian relatives are exotic, but the good news for anyone living between Monterey Bay in the north and San Diego and its environs in the south is that members of the Proteaceae family are well-adapted to California coastal regions. These subtropical flowering shrubs provide drama and stature in the residential garden, but you’ll also find them blanketing the hillsides north and east of San Diego. That’s where some of the best proteas in the world are produced on flower farms large and small.

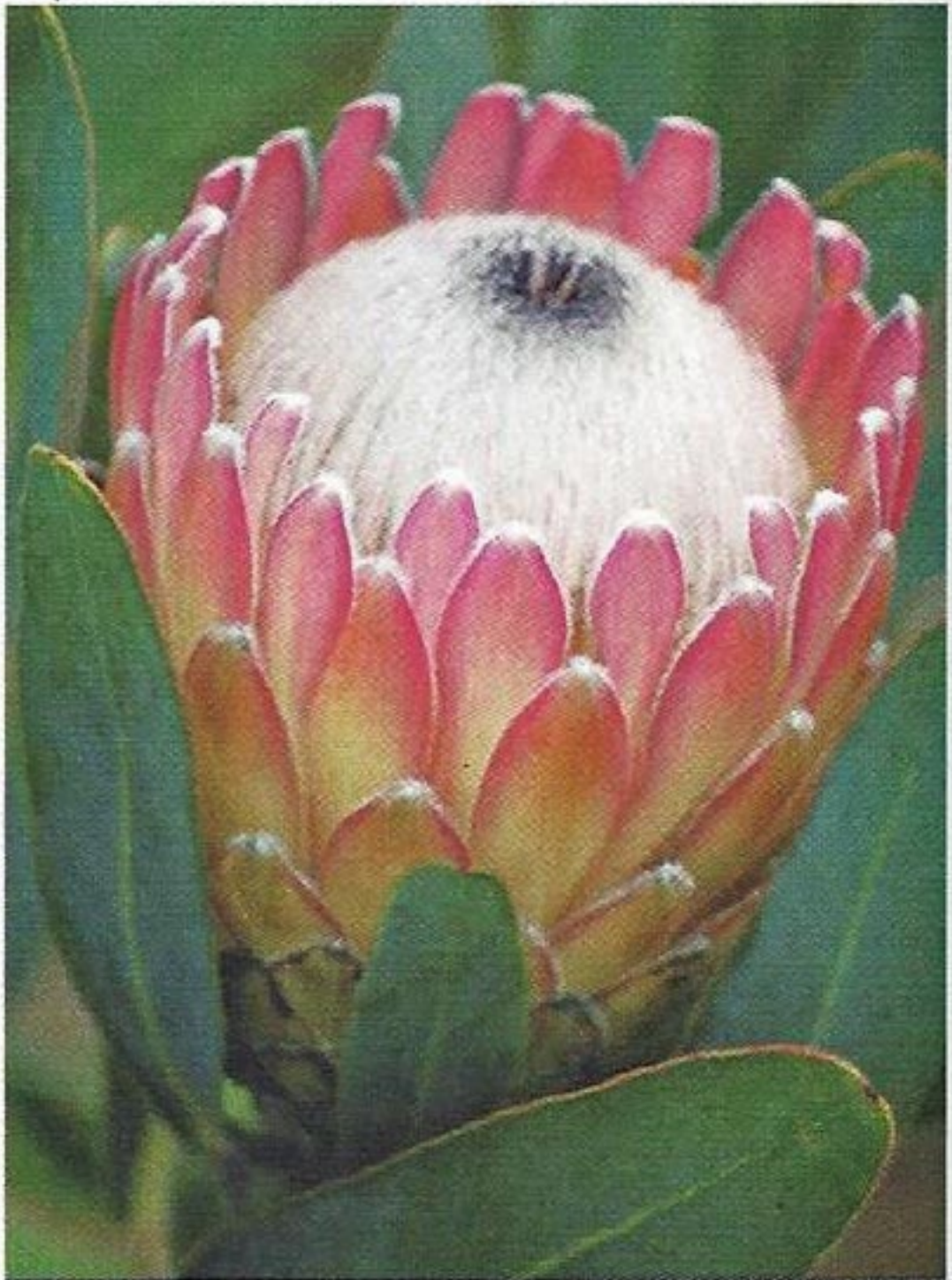
Since immigrating to the United States in 1977, Resendiz and his family have grown a wide array of cut flowers and plants, particularly South African and Australian varieties. Today he is president of Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers in Fallbrook, California, and is president of the California Protea Association.

The Proteaceae family comprises more than 1,400 species. With flowers ranging from 2 to 12 inches in size, proteas typically bloom in fall, winter, and spring, although Resendiz Brothers’s growing and breeding practices allow them to harvest and ship the flower nearly year-round to customers in the United States, Canada, and Japan.



Coastal California is one of five mediterranean-climate regions on the globe where proteas can be produced. The plant requires full sun, acidic soil, good drainage and air circulation, as well as mild winters, so proteas flourish just as well in a place like San Diego County as if they were in their native environment.

As a cut flower, proteas are an exceptional value with a long vase life. A bouquet of proteas makes a striking, contemporary arrangement that you will enjoy for more than two weeks provided you re-cut the flower stems and refresh the water every few days.



ABOVE TOP: *Leucospermum* 'Tango'  
ABOVE: *Protea* 'Susara'  
LEFT: *Protea* 'Pinata'



One of California's largest suppliers of South African and Australian flora, Resendiz Brothers produces more than 200 varieties of these unique, non-native plants, including their own hybrids. They also operate the region's largest Australian and South African wholesale nursery, offering more than 75 varieties of flowering plants and foliage from seed or propagated from cuttings.

I recently interviewed Mel Resendiz and Diana Roy for my Slow Flowers podcast. Our conversation has been edited and condensed here:

**DP:** *Mel, how did you start growing proteas?*

**MR:** I worked for Zorro Protea Farms in Rancho Santa Fe from 1978 to 1999. When the owner sold 40 acres to a developer, he closed down the flower farm. I decided to start my own business and I found land in Fallbrook, about 25 miles north of San Diego.

**DP:** *What is it about this flower that you admire?*

**MR:** I love proteas. They are all so beautiful. When we started, wholesalers and bouquet makers paid us 25 cents per stem, my brothers said, "Let's grow something else." But I wanted to stick with protea. I knew that some day the price would go up. Today, depending on the variety and the time of the year, the wholesale price of protea ranges from \$1 to \$7 a stem.



Ismael "Mel" Resendiz inspecting the *Leucadendron discolor* 'Pom Pom' crop in March.





Harvesting 'Pink Duke' protea. Photo: courtesy of Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers

**DP:** *What is the size of Resendiz Brothers's farm?*

**MR:** We grow on 140 acres, but I also manage other properties so together we're harvesting from 250 acres. We grow about 1,500 protea plants per acre on land that is quite steep. The protea plants can handle that topography. Drainage is good and the breezes move through the rows of plants to provide good air circulation.

**DP:** *What kind of cultural conditions exist on your farm and what varieties of cut flowers do you grow?*

**MR:** Soil and weather conditions are the same as what you would find on a South African protea farm. The soil is pure decomposed granite with a pH that ranges between 5 and 7. We grow a wide variety of South African and Australian ornamental flowering shrubs, including protea, leucadendron, leucospermum, *Serruria*

*florida*, waratah, wax flower, grevillea flowers and foliage, leptospermum, and banksias.

**DP:** *When are proteas at their peak?*

**MR:** Some of the first to bloom are the hybrids 'Pink Ice' and 'Pink Mink', which are harvested in the fall, followed by 'Brenda' and 'Pink Duke'. Varieties change month to month. We continue to propagate and grow our own hybrids. We're trying to add varieties that bloom closer to Valentine's Day so as to spread the volume out through the course of the year.

**DP:** *How do you care for the plants?*

**MR:** Proteas require very little fertilizer—too much produces fast-growing plants with crooked stems and heavier foliage. That's not ideal for packing. We can get 100 stems in a shipping box if the stems are straight.





ABOVE: A showy architectural stem of *Banksia speciosa*.

ABOVE LEFT: *Leucospermum lineare* × *cordifolium* 'Succession'

LEFT: *Protea* 'Red Baron'

The California Protea Association is a close-knit community of 30 to 40 member farms that all work together, sharing information on planting and growing. According to Diana Roy at Rensendiz Brothers, "There just isn't enough protea being grown to meet the demand, so it makes sense for us all to work together to bring up production. The association can definitely grow to 80 to 100 farms." For more information visit the California Protea Association website at [www.californiaprotea.org](http://www.californiaprotea.org).

*Debra Prinzing is a leading advocate for American-grown cut flowers. You'll find her Slow Flowers Podcast at [www.debraprinzing.com](http://www.debraprinzing.com).*

### Proteas in the home landscape

Provide a full-sun exposure with good air movement around the plants. Ideally, plant on a mound or slope to promote excellent drainage in soil that is slightly acidic. When transplanting, set plants into the soil at the same level that they were in the container. Mulch to conserve water but keep mulch free of the crown of the plant. Water regularly until plants are established. Protect from frost. Small varieties are suitable for growing in containers.