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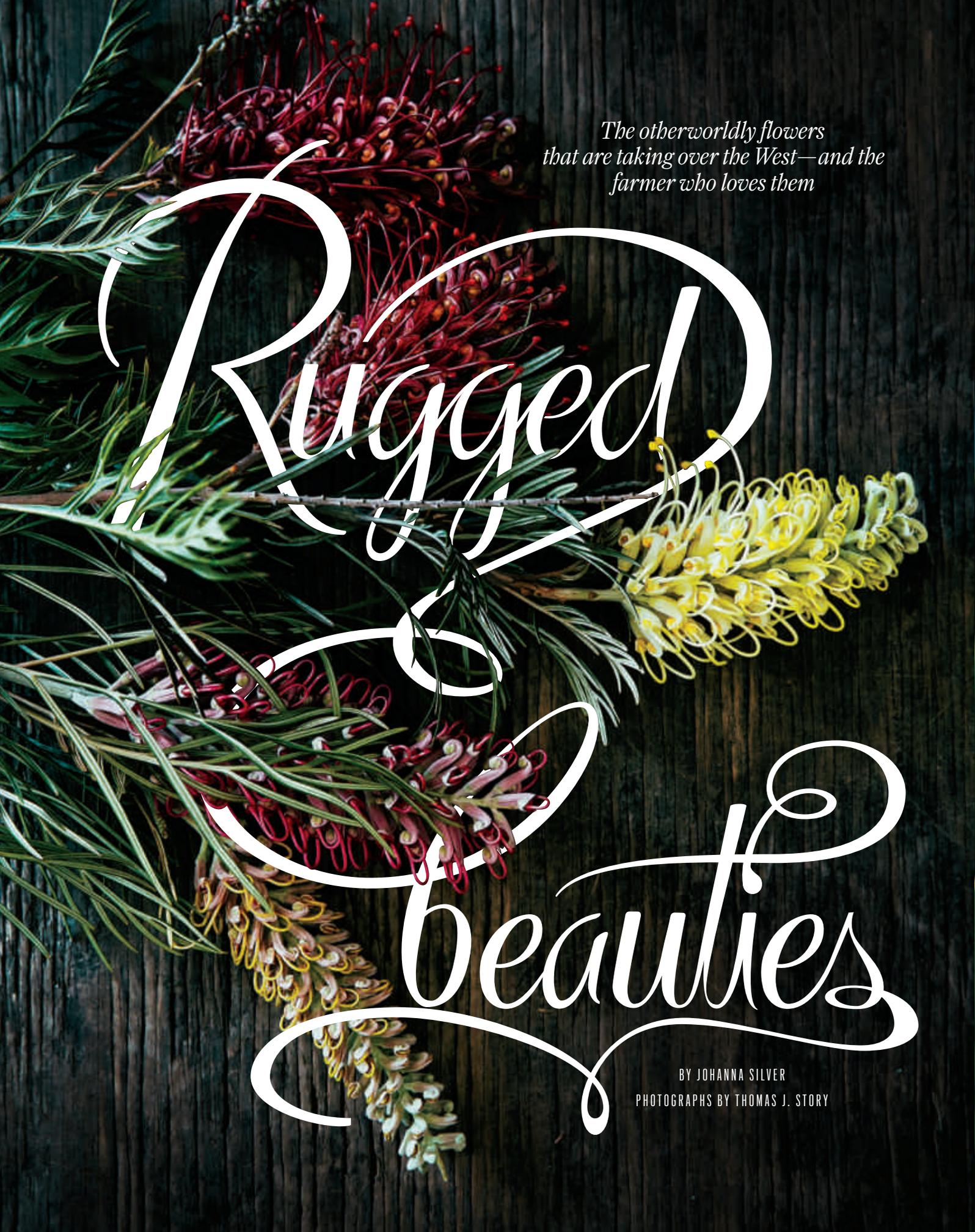
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*The otherworldly flowers
that are taking over the West—and the
farmer who loves them*

Rugged & beauties

BY JOHANNA SILVER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS J. STORY



*From left: Grevillea;
king protea
(P. cynaroides).*

I

I'm riding in Ismael "Mel" Resendiz's truck, my knuckles white from gripping the handle above the door. I'd been warned about the rough cliffs at

Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers, in San Diego County. These warnings feel entirely insufficient. The roads are so narrow that I lean toward the center of the car, terrified that my weight could be the difference between safety and a long tumble down to the bottom of the valley. Adding to my fear is the .22 rifle in the back, "for rattlesnakes," Mel says.

He stops the truck, and we climb toward the plants. There aren't even terraces to buffer the slope ("They waste too much land," Mel says). He shows me how to dig my heels in the crusty soil and walk up sideways. I feel like a baby goat that can't find its footing. Then, through the mass of shrubby plants, my eyes catch a glimmer of what we're here to see—a delicate protea flower.

Proteas are among the oldest flowering plants on the planet, with fossils dating back 300 million years. The family takes its name from the shape-changing Greek god Proteus. It's large and diverse—there are more than 70 genera, which include large-flowered *Banksia*, spiderlike *Grevillea*, pincushion (*Leucospermum*) flowers, even macadamia nuts. "I can see a flower and be able to say, 'Oh, yeah—that's a protea,'" says Marc Johnson, resident protea expert at the San Francisco Botanic Garden. "They look like aliens."

On Mel's steep parcel, I'm captivated by the 'Fiesta,' a hybrid protea. The flowers form 3-inch-wide cylinders that fade from deep to pale pink—downy fluffs that look like pink owl heads perched atop rangy shrubs.

"I thought they were so fancy," Mel says, recalling his first encounter with proteas in 1981. He grew up in Querétaro, Mexico, leaving school after the fifth grade to cut sugarcane and pick cotton, two of the most grueling jobs in agriculture. After immigrating north in search of work, he landed in Southern California, where he discovered the flowers. He worked with two of the state's most experienced protea growers, Howard Asper Sr. and Peter Sacks, then slowly built his farm by buying parcels of land—10 acres here, 13 there. Today, Mel's protea farm extends over 150 acres and supports 25 employees, including his brothers Porfirio, Ramon, and Raul; his wife, Amparo; and his son, Ismael Jr.



Proteas thrive in just a few areas in the world, Northern San Diego County and Maui being the centers of production in the United States. Native to the Southern Hemisphere, with the largest concentration in Australia and South Africa, most have evolved in nutrient-poor soils and dry summers. Too much water and any fertilizer can kill them—Mel barely feeds his and waters them by a drip system (which he laid by hand across those

*“This isn’t your traditional
flower farm. It’s more like a quilt
on a mountain.”*

—KASEY CRONQUIST, CEO, CALIFORNIA CUT FLOWER COMMISSION



crazy cliffs) every five to eight days. Proteas need perfect drainage, sunshine, and coastal breezes. In fact, they’re about the only thing that can be cultivated on these hills.

Lucky for him, the demand for proteas has reached fever pitch. “I’ve never sold so many as I have in the past two years,” says Mel, who keeps buying more land to expand the farm. “It’s like a giant race to grow and harvest.” Around Valentine’s Day, he ships up to 10,000 stems a

day. That’s a far cry from his early days spent cultivating proteas on other people’s land. “We’d have to throw out more than half the flowers when the owner came to visit,” he says. “We didn’t want him to see how many we couldn’t sell.” Debra Prinzing, author and founder of SlowFlowers.com, explains: “Proteas got stuck in this tropical ’80s look that went out of fashion, but they’ve been able to break out. They can look cottagey or totally

*Fiery orange
“Tango” pincushion
(Leucospermum)
flowers erupt
at the Resendiz
Brothers farm in
Rainbow, CA.*

modern.” Plus, proteas bloom in the off-season, “filling the role of that dramatic dahlia that you can’t get locally in the middle of winter,” she says.

Despite the climbing demand for the flowers, it’s surprisingly difficult for farmers to get their hands on even a fraction of the varieties. Seeds, often collected abroad by people like Johnson—who travels with a USDA permit to bring plant material back to this country—can have germination rates as low as 10 percent. Others won’t sprout unless they’ve gone through a fire (Johnson sometimes uses a blowtorch to blast seeds before sinking them into a potting medium). Mel arranges deals with a handful of protea growers in Australia and South Africa to ship him varieties he doesn’t have. He’s also taken to creating his own—cross-pollinating flowers to come up with pincushion hybrids, and grafting proteas he likes onto more vigorous rootstocks. (His favorite creation: bright red ‘Eileen’.) Over the past 30 years, he’s invented 15 new varieties, much lower than breeding programs for other plants.

Some proteas are so sought after that they have become the targets of horticultural crime. Rare species of blushing bride (*Serruria florida*), which have tissue paper-like flowers, were stolen from the San Francisco Botanical Garden. And people have snuck onto Mel’s fields late at night to snip cuttings (not a great idea—remember that gun?).

Mel is territorial over his crops because, besides being his livelihood, they’re also his loves. “You have to see him make a bouquet,” says Diana Roy, business manager at Resendiz Brothers. “It’s the real Mel.” So once we’re down from the cliffs, we head to the packing shed. Mel takes his spot at a table and starts grabbing stems from harvest buckets. Just like the plants themselves, rugged and delicate merge together as this burly farmer builds a floral arrangement.

“I don’t always make it to the shed,” Mel confesses. “Especially in spring, when the flowers are just so beautiful, I make bouquets right in the fields.” You’ve got to be kidding me, I think to myself. Should we go shoot some rattlesnakes or something? But as I’m about to poke fun, he hands over the arrangement, and like any recipient of a protea bouquet, I’m speechless. 🌸

 **DIGITAL BONUS** See more breathtaking proteas: sunset.com/proteas.

WHERE TO BUY

Unless you have the perfect conditions for proteas (plenty of sunshine, dry summers, and fast-draining soil), enjoying the blooms as cut flowers is your best bet. Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers, in Rainbow, California (resendizbrothers.com), is currently wholesale only, but is slated to launch The Protea Store for retail orders of Protea along with *Banksia*, *Grevillea*, *Leucadendron*, *Leucospermum*, and others by early 2015. Western farmers who sell to the public: Rainbow Protea (rainbowprotea.com), also in San Diego County, and Kula Farm Flowers (kulafarm.com), on Maui.

CUT-FLOWER CARE

Sturdy stems and long-lasting blooms make proteas the perfect cut flowers. Extend their life in a vase by following these steps: (1) Snip off about ¼ inch from the end of the stem. (2) Strip stems of any leaves that will be below the water’s surface. (3) Add ¼ teaspoon of bleach per quart of water to prevent algae from growing—or change water daily. (4) Keep out of direct sunlight.

HOW TO DRY

Faded blooms often dry without losing any petals or leaves, and they can last for years. Stand the stems in an empty bucket or vase, or hang them upside down (they’ll lose their shape if stored in a pile or on a flat surface). Expect the colors to fade to shades of tan.

From top:
King protea (*P. cynaroides*),
Leucospermum ‘Flame Giant’,
and *Banksia*. Opposite:
Mel with an arrangement
he made in the fields.



*“I’ve built my
whole life around
these flowers.”*

—MEL RESENDIZ

