

# A new California field cuts industry emerges

by Vic Ball



The people at Brothers Brothers—from left to right: Doug Brothers, sales manager; Gary Brothers, director, research and development; Steven Rau (kneeling and holding an alstromeria bunch), production manager; Jose Campos, field supervisor; and Daniel Campos, field supervisor.

Left, a good example of why the new field flower crops here are so exciting. Here are cut tulips, photographed February 2, good quality, ready to go to market. Grown outdoors right through the winter! In the photo from the left, Jeff McGrew, Ball Seed, Gary Brothers, and brother Doug.

There's excitement here!

We just scratched the surface during a trip among northern California growers. There have, of course, been field-grown cut flowers here for a long time. But in the past several years, "field-grown cuts" have taken on a whole new thrust. Many new crops and growers (often young people), and they're already turning up surprising potentials.

Several examples:

- *Alstroemeria outdoors, year-round.* We saw one field (a whole hillside), about 10 acres of them right outdoors in February in the Watsonville area. Good quality.
- *Freesias, a big, big crop.* Major acreage of them, many outdoors, some under Saran or unheated poly in mid winter in the Watsonville area. Again, good quality.
- *Good, clean, cut tulips.* Again, right outdoors in February and again the Watsonville area. How can Europe afford to grow them under heated glass, fly them 3,000 to 4,000 miles and compete? Can even the Dutch super marketing job offset this major penalty?
- *Dried cuts, also getting big.* One grower alone does 400 plus acres of them in three California locations. Dried cut flowers are also a big Dutch specialty.
- *Mona Lisa anemones.* One California grower does 25,000 a year in unheated poly.

We could (and will) go on. One grower doing 9 million cut iris per year—two locations, Castroville and Arcata. Also dozens of growers doing major production of cut Asiatic lilies. We haven't even mentioned the major production of dozens of perennials—statice, gyp, dianthus, delphiniums; plus an exciting new godetia that ships, keeps seven to 10 days.

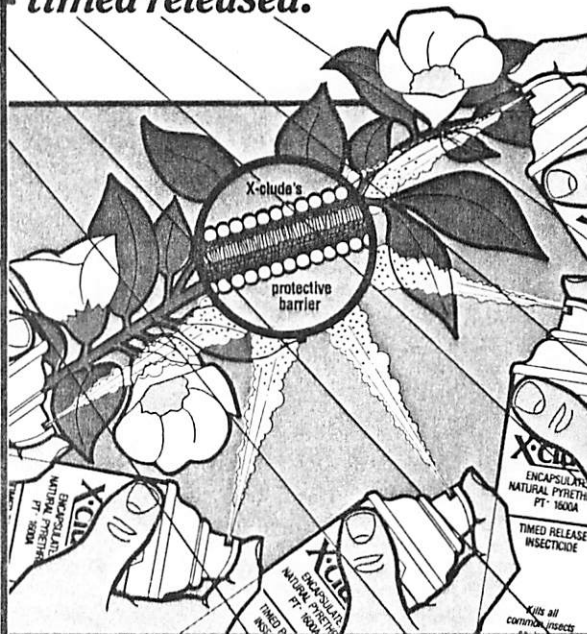
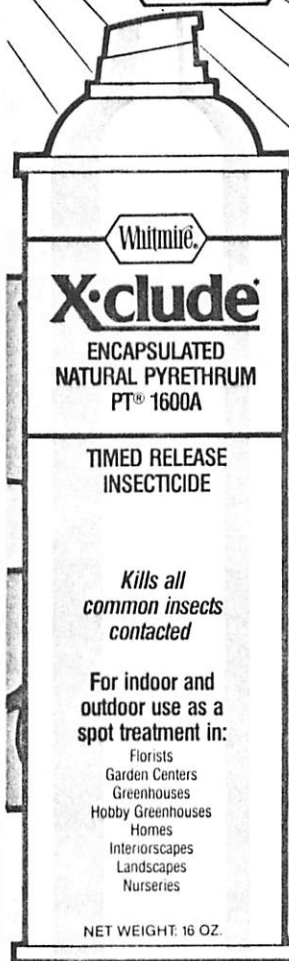
Important point: This new look at field-grown cuts is not at all restricted to northern California. Important outdoor unheated poly or Saran production is occurring from San Diego up into northern California and in Washington, Oregon, Colorado and Florida. And, there are dozens of summer field cut growers in the East.

You get the feeling that a lot of the rules of how and when to grow these crops are being rewritten. The growers knee deep in these new crops and new production areas are really pioneer-

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ing—perhaps forerunners of an emerging new industry?

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Clearly all of this has been influenced by the massive Dutch invasion of our US markets—with their exciting new cut flowers, which have delighted American consumers. Certainly, their well done marketing has been a part of their success. Those colorful posters, ads that you see everywhere. They are still hard at it! All of this is a lesson US growers must learn if we are to compete with Europe. It's called co-op promotion. But US producers bringing new crops, new production areas onto the market are giving the Dutch and other overseas suppliers very tough competition. And now the cheap US dollar is helping the US grower too.

### The Brothers brothers

The Brothers brothers are right in the middle of all this. And yes, it's owned/managed by the three Brothers brothers: Gary, Jeff and Doug. Steve McRau, production manager, and Daniel and Jose Campos, production supervisors, are also deeply involved. The Brothers' ranch presently includes about 120 acres of crop land (plus 60 acres of satellite plantings and a whole valley into which they can expand). All located in the Watsonville area, 5 miles from the Pacific.

Alstroemerias are their No. 1 crop and this is their fifth year with them. Don't miss the photo of the fine field of them. By the way, you don't see a lot of color in these photographs simply because most field flowers are shipped maybe a quarter open.

Almost 2 million Asiatic lily bulbs per year, a very important crop.

Several other major crops include statice, cut callas, delphiniums and perennial gyp.

"Plus," says Doug Brothers, "47 other crops, many of them on a trial basis this year. By the way, we have about 40 varieties of alstroemerias now. Also, dozens of new items brought back from Australia by Gary's recent trip."

Other crops important here: Protea, 26 varieties. Also, the godetia that we mentioned before, which will be expanded in '88. Also, perennial scabiosa, bird of paradise, ranunculus (Bloomingdale) and trials of Mona Lisa anemones planted in October. Cut tulips are still experimental but a very promising crop.

The market for all of this has been predominately California, but is shifting to the East.

Their production is predominately outdoors, a few things under Saran or plastic.

Paul Baldwin grows about 60 acres of field cuts outside Watsonville, California. Here, he holds a stem of the new godetia.



in the valley floor. Also, there is a major difference in plant response to crops on a slope facing the sun vs. those that face north. The soil here, by the way, is 300' deep pure sand, and below that, gravel. No drainage problem here!

One more interesting bit at Brothers: There was a difficult infestation of two-spotted spider mite on static and gyp. Sprays just were not working, resistance. So they brought in some predator mites to integrate with their spray program to control the situation. Doug's comment: "They cleaned the mites out perfectly. The only problem was, having done that, those expensive predators left town."

### Paul Baldwin

With his wife Suzanne, Paul operates about 60 acres of field cut production (under Baldwin Field Flowers & Gumball greenhouses) plus a wholesale operation (Baldwin Flower Distributors), which sells their own production as well as material from other growers statewide. Location: Again, just a thousand or so yards from the Pacific Ocean, in the Watsonville area. It rarely freezes here, but it had been a very cold, unfavorable January.

On marketing, Paul says, "California is a big market for us, but we do sell predominately west of the Mississippi.

The Brothers seem to have five or 10 proven winners, plus a lot of intensive trailing of new crops. So often these new crops have critical daylength or temperature and light requirements to flower and to make adequate stem length. It's these things that are being probed by the Brothers and other growers in this area.

Another interesting point that came up in talking with Gary: the many "micro-climates" that can be found in that 640-acre valley in which they operate. It's hard to believe, but plants on the hilltop, 400' above a valley floor, are far less subject to frost than crops down in the valley. Conversely, in summer weather it can be a lot cooler down

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Robert "Mac" Moore

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We do broker some, but our strategy is to grow everything ourselves. We do have an excellent climate here.

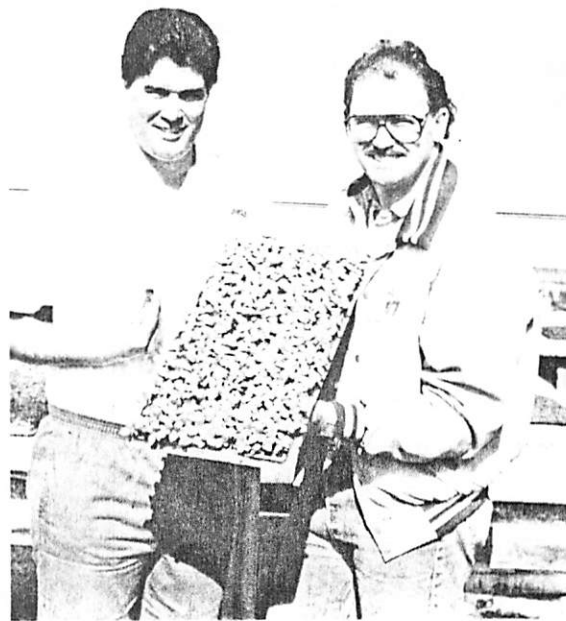
"Freesias are probably our No. 1 crop here." And probably Paul is the No. 1 cut freesia grower in the US (about 1.5 million corms per year). They are grown under Saran and some under unheated double poly. Fifty percent light reduction, and being a bit warmer under cover improves stem length. And says Paul, "I need a cool soil temperature for the first six weeks to get them to flower."

Paul ships freesia stems with one flower showing color. By the way, he uses Chrysal solution post-harvest—after the cut—to improve flower opening performance and keeping quality.

Another star performer here is the godetia (much hardier, longer lasting and a better shipper than the original annual godetia). They're all grown from specialist plugs, production is more or less year-round. Like so many things, it's a new crop and they don't have all the answers yet. There's important slow down of growth and production during an especially cold winter like this year. But demand for good godetia seems to be strong, prices favorable. Again, godetias are shipped with one flower open on a spray.

Land here is extremely expensive and says Paul, "We use laser equipment

Headstart Nurseries, Gilroy, California. On the left Steve Costa, owner, on the right Loren Hope in charge of cut flower plug production. Headstart produces plugs of many cut flower species for the new field cut industry.



to level our fields. It gives us within 1/2% of a flat field—and no standing water. We had to tear this soil up 4' deep to break up hard subsoil in order to get good drainage. But with the temperature and light levels, it's a great growing area."

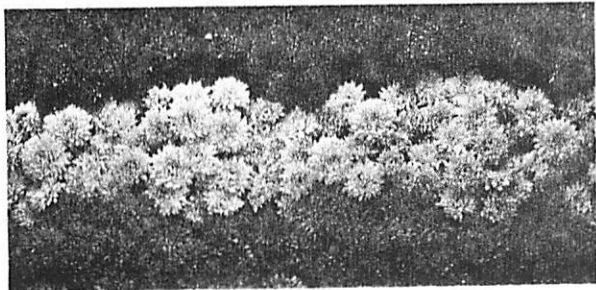
Drip irrigation is widely used, just a line that goes down the row of crop and has a drip hole about every 8". With this irrigation, it's possible to

plant a little less than 1" plugs directly into the open field. No overhead irrigation.

#### Headstart Nurseries, the propagator

Headstart, near Gilroy, is an important backup to this emerging field cuts industry. They supply plugs to the growers of many of these field cut flower items. Result: At a modest cost,

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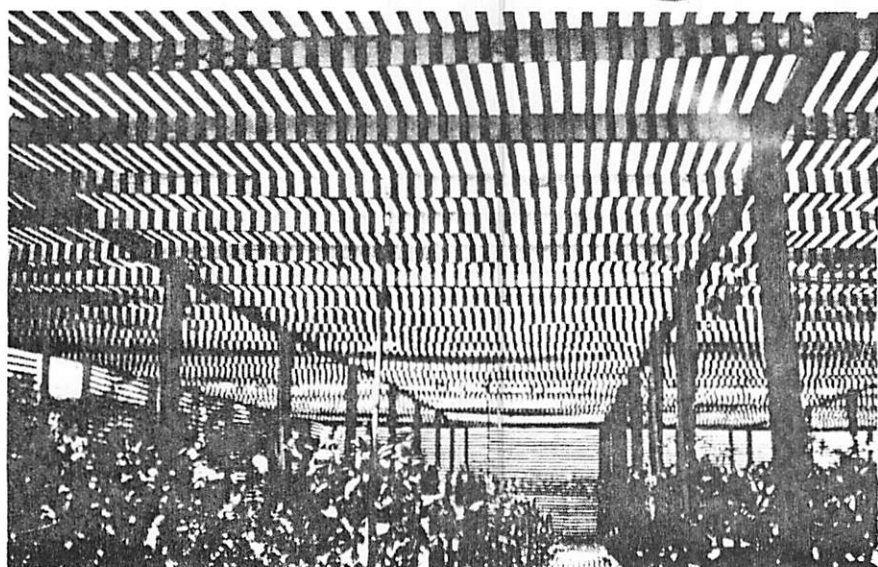
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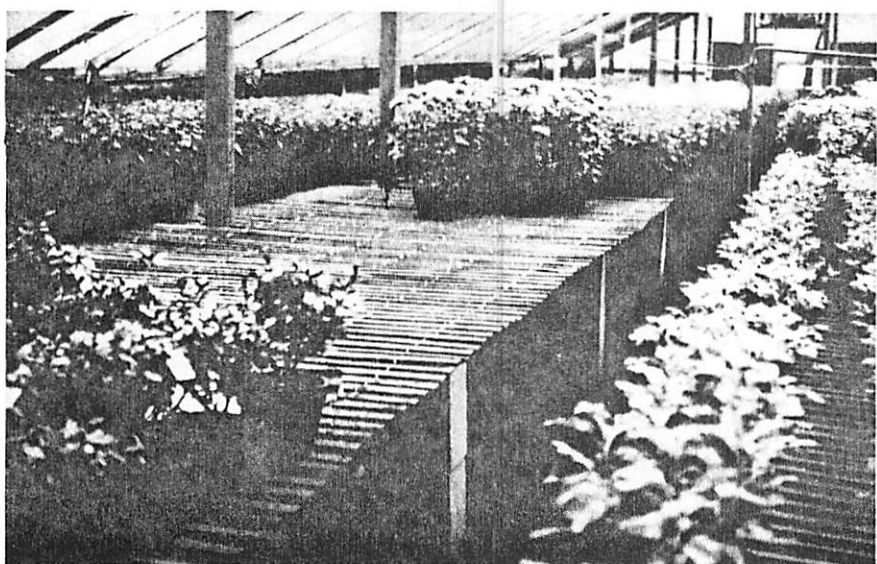


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the grower gets more crops per acre vs. direct seeding. It's always easier to put a plug in the ground and give it a drip irrigation line than it is to get seed to germinate in the open field. In any case, growers are moving importantly toward plugs, especially on such items as the several perennial statice species, perennial gyp, delphinium, lots of snapdragons (grown in unheated greenhouses here), lots of new F, godetia, asters, ranunculus, Mona Lisa anemones, perennial scabiosa, sweet William and lisianthus.

Headstart's main job is producing 70 million starter plugs for the California vegetable growers—where they have again staked out an important position with the local industry. The operation is well mechanized, clean and busy. Steve Costa is general manager. Steve's brother, Randy, is production manager of vegetables; Loren Holt oversees ornamental plug production.

## Field cuts elsewhere

Here's a very quick sketch of a few major field cut growers elsewhere.

Kubota Nursery, Castroville (near Salinas). They do several million top grade cut iris a year, open field. Plus mini carnations and assorted field cuts.

Northern California (Arcadia) and the Northwest. There's a major cut tulip and cut species lily crop in the North-

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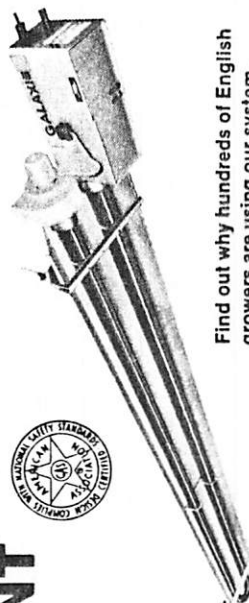
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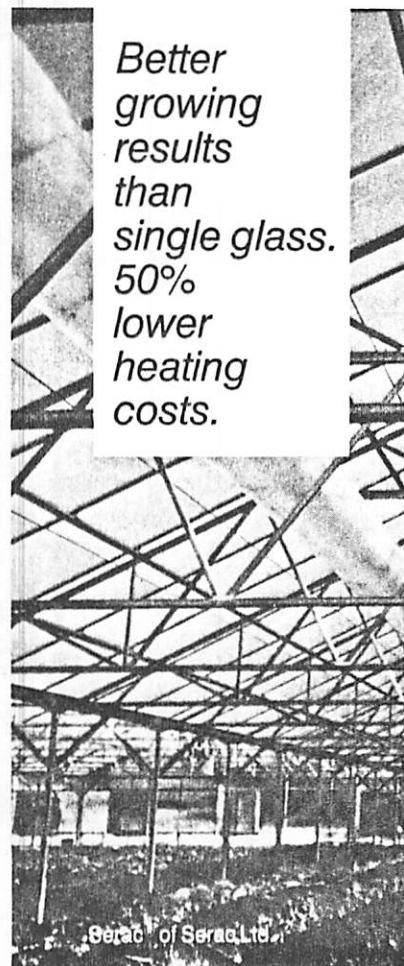
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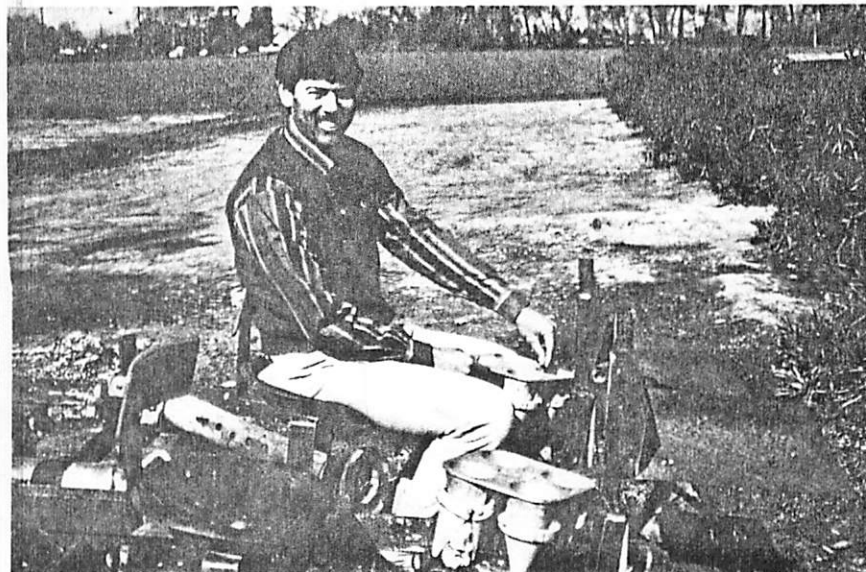
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It is possible to plant these little 1" plugs with field planters—like the one shown above. Here the worker rides the equipment, drops the plugs into the 4 cups by his right knee. The machine plants them and waters them. Unfortunately, not much used in the area by the field cut flower growers.

west. We hear of roughly a million square feet of greenhouses predominately species lilies. Also a lot of cut tulips. DeGoode in eastern Washington is a major specialist. Incidentally, most of the tulips for the West Coast cut flower crops are from bulbs grown in Washington.

Tom Turner, San Diego, is also taking on Dutch species lily production, does

about 3 million a year. Also tulips, liatris and daffodils. Tom is very knowledgeable and produces a consistent product.

Doug Anderson, Watsonville. Doug does about 100 acres of field stocks (*Mathiola incana*), No. 1 quality here—equal to Dutch imports.

Phil Starr, Elkhorn Flowers, Watsonville. Phil is a top Mona Lisa anemone



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cut flower specialist, does about 25,000 a year under poly with open sides, no heat. He flowers from October to April, all grown from plugs by the way. We hear that the plug (seed grown) plants produce more stems and tend to produce over a longer period of time, more steadily, less flushing. We hear of a 25 to 30 ¢ year-round price per stem.

Kee Kitayama, Watsonville. Main responsibilities: Park View Floral and U.S. Flowers. Kee, one of the now widespread Kitayama family operations, moved to the Watsonville area about 1970 "to grow field and greenhouse cut flowers." He has a major operation only one thousand yards from the ocean, about 1.3 million square feet of greenhouse (nearly all roses), plus important field cut flower production. Major items in his field cut production are various statice species, sweet William, perennial gyp, delphinium, liatris, greenhouse snapdragons, godetia and importantly, cut lilies. He also does Mona Lisa anemones (flowers them through Mother's Day with their cool spring climate) and some alstroemerias.

This is the Watsonville area, and being near the ocean, there is rarely ever a freeze. Kee finds this climate critically important, both for the mild winter and for the cool, even summer temperatures. "We have a west wind off the ocean 95% of the time, and that means even temperatures. Our soil here is marina sand, it's about 100' deep in this local area, which makes perfect drainage. We can work the fields immediately after a rain."

Like others, Kee is still doing exploratory crops of these field cut flowers, seems very much interested in them.

We talked the rose market, obviously very big, especially for Kee. Like other quality rose specialists, he is at least holding his own, but concerned about the inroads of imports. This particular area has a special quality advantage during the summer months, again the typical low 80s day temperature and ample light.

Interesting comment on carnations. They do some here (miniatures only). Obvious reason: Lot less labor and, says Kee, "We can be competitive here, but not in the standard carnation. We're actually seeing some new greenhouse construction in northern California for carnations these days. Production is steady or better.

"Valentine's Day demand for roses was very strong, unfortunately the crop was down a bit, apparently cloudy, unfavorable weather during December and January."

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