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FIELDS OF FLOWERS: THE CALIFORNIA TOUR

by Ann Reilly

Did you ever wonder, as you were opening a flower seed packet and getting ready to sow your bedding plants or making a cut flower arrangement, where the seeds that grew those flowers came from? If they were grown in the United States, there's a 95% chance that they were produced in California. Even if they weren't produced in the U.S., but in some far away place like Costa Rica or Honduras, they probably spent at least a part of their life in California in a research greenhouse or a field trial.

Being a person with an almost insatiable curiosity, I boarded a bus in Los Angeles one sunny afternoon with 32 other horticulturists, writers and seedsmen to find out all I could about California's valleys of flowers. Led by the good natured Jim Wilson of All-America Selections, a bus driver who would do most anything short of cutting off his arm, and a desire to fill our eyes and souls with the beauty of flowers, we took off for the north and descended on the California seed producing and research stations.

Past the surfers and the landslides at Malibu and a little in from Ventura is Santa Paula, home to Burpee's warm weather seed production and trial grounds since 1947. There we saw Burpee's "news" for 1980 planted among the Burpee "old reliables" and some flowers and vegetables of the future. There's a new calendula called "Dwarf Gem" that comes in radiant shades of lemon yellow, apricot, gold and orange, four separate colors of Bouquet Hybrid zinnias—yellow, orange, rose-pink and scarlet; three separate colors of Happy Days Dwarf Double French marigold—yellow, orange and red; and two other marigolds, "Golden Climax Improved Hybrid" and "Seven Star", a triploid in mixed colors. There are also three vegetables: sweet corn "Candy Stick II", "Butter Boy" hybrid squash, and "Supersteak" V F tomato.

Valley of the Flowers

As beautiful as Santa Paula is with Burpee's expansive

and colorful grounds laid against the golden hills, it is Lompoc that wears the jewels of California's flower production. It is here that 2,000 acres produce half of the world's flower seeds. It is here, in this blazing-with-color valley, that it never gets too hot or too cold, that it rains just the right amount, that the soil is good, the wells deep and the ocean breezes tempering. Sound like Camelot?

Burpee was the first of the major seed producers to move into Lompoc, done in 1909 by W. Atlee Burpee himself after he visited and quickly recognized the virtues of the valley. Before World War I, most of America's seeds came from Europe, but with the outbreak of the war, the source of most of the seed supply was cut off. This was all the Lompoc valley needed to expand into a wide range of seed production.

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Flowers, flowers everywhere in the Lompoc Valley



Thrashing of sweet peas to harvest the seeds

Fields of Flowers: The California Tour (continued)

Flowers, Flowers Everywhere

In 1920, the Bodgers came to the Lompoc Valley and since then the firm has expanded from a one man concern to an international supplier of flower seeds. Bodger farms close to 700 acres of flowers in Lompoc, more than any other firm in the valley, and has another 100 acres in Chino. When I left Bodger, I thought I never wanted to see another marigold, because they're famous for lots of them, including the A.A.S. "Queen Sophia". Bodger also produces quantities of zinnias, ageratum, asters, stocks, delphiniums, sweet peas and the only F₁ hybrid calenda.

Bodger's associate firm, Environmental Seed Producers, has 200 acres of wildflowers in production in Lompoc for sale to the landscape, home garden, roadside and reclamation markets. They can't compare in beauty to petunias or lobelia, but they do have a place in the "return to nature" movement with their perennial and no-care qualities.

Denholm has been in Lompoc since 1939, but it really took off in 1973 when it was bought by George J. Ball Inc. and increased its production and breeding. Today, Denholm produces over 200 varieties of marigolds, sweet peas, alyssum, dahlia, gazania and delphinium. There's nothing more regal than being surrounded further than the eye can see by the rich blue and purple of lobelia. I found it easy to do at Denholm, for they grow 90% of our country's supply of lobelia in impeccably clean and rogued fields.

Secret of the Valley

It was at Denholm that I learned the secret of Lompoc's success—the climate. Over 500 varieties of flowers carpet the floors of the valley, the cooler crops like sweet peas grown nearest the shore and the warmer crops like zinnia grown inland. It was at Denholm that I learned of the intricacies of harvesting seeds. Some crops are cut off at the ground (sweet peas are one), dried and trashed. It is when the morning fog fills the air that all crops except nasturtium are cut because they are not brittle at that time. The afternoon sun dries the plants, and it rarely rains (only 12" per year), so that usually is not a consideration.

Some seeds, like scabiosa and helichrysum, are hand picked; others, like African daisy, nemesia, geraniums and French marigolds have their seeds vacuumed off of the flower heads.

It was also in Lompoc that I learned of some of the precautions needed to insure pure and viable seed. Different varieties of marigolds are produced at least a mile apart, for they can accidentally cross if closer. A planting of corn flower in a windrow is placed between sweet peas to keep the colors isolated. Huge rolls of canvas are a common sight in harvested fields; the seed is inside keeping safe and dry prior to cleaning.

Somewhat up the coast in Guadalupe a group from the wandering bus climbed atop it to fully appreciate the dazzle of the production fields at Waller Flowerseed Co. Nothing I have ever seen compares to the softness of pastel petunias next to the fire of nasturtiums, all set against a sky of blue and a string of rugged mountains. Waller Flowerseed Co., known primarily for dahlia "Redskin", produces "unusuals" in immaculate fields that glisten like a patchwork quilt.

It was at Waller that we also saw the process of seed

cleaning with wooden equipment whose design hasn't changed since the turn of the century. Seeds first go through a series of screens which remove debris, pieces of stem, etc. The seeds are then placed on a vibrating tilted table, and like magic the best seeds go uphill where they fall off and are collected for packaging.

Goldsmith, Gilroy and Garlic

Further north toward the city by the Bay the air smells of garlic but the fields are filled with the wonder of flowers. This is Gilroy, home of Goldsmith seeds, the babe of the American seed industry. Goldsmith has come a long way since its founding in 1962, and has used its creative research to put together a long list of award winning flower varieties.

Goldsmith produces no seeds in Gilroy, but instead in Guatemala where the climate is perfect and the 60 greenhouses used for hybrid seed production never need to be heated or cooled. Gilroy is, however, the company's research center, where new varieties are made and tested in greenhouse and field trials.

Goldsmith has nine new varieties this year, the most ever, and is working on slews more. Geraniums in new colors, botrytis resistant petunias, heat resistant marigolds, sun tolerant begonias and dianthus for potted plants are only a few of the potential offerings from Goldsmith for the next few years to add to its current 200 varieties of flowers and vegetables.

If the bus ever wanders through California again, I'll be on it. It's hard to describe the consuming beauty of fields of flowers.

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