

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Fostering Peace One Plant at a Time

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Photography by Matt Dube/Ten Speed Photography



A man who approaches every task with a green compass, Jim Notestein is inspired by the biological wonders that surround him. “The plant kingdom has been really fun for me and my ancestors,” enthuses Jim, owner and operator of Notestein Nurseries in Gainesville, Florida. Full of energy, enthusiasm and an amazing zest for life, Jim regularly launches into new projects, inspiring others to join him.

Developing a sustainable local economy has been a part of Jim’s philosophy way before “eat local” became a catch phrase. In fact, Jim was one of the key planners behind Gainesville Farmer’s Market.

It all began in the late 1970s when Jim was approached by the local government to develop sustainable solutions to assist with the recent economic downturn. And so, he and other local farmers got together and developed a farmer’s market.

“It was the first farmer’s market in over 50 years; today there are now 11 farmer’s markets in this area,” said Jim. “In ’78, the University of Florida gave us an analysis of what was going on. They discovered that every dollar spent in the local farmer’s market stayed in the market for 11 to 12 transactions.”

Jim was amazed by the possibilities that this market unveiled—in particular the ability for a local economy to feed itself. He’s pleased to see that this trend to stay local is returning and he would like to see this growth continue. Jim enthusiastically shares his vision of cultivating public space for horticulture and eventually creating a fully sustainable community.

Gardening for Jim is in his genes. A fifth-generation Floridian, Jim’s ancestor was one of the first horticulturists in the area.

“Some of my ancestor’s horticulture work was with Thomas Edison, who had a winter home in Fort Myers,” said Jim. “Edison’s Fort Myer home held one of the largest collections of plants in North America. One of

these plants that Edison received from my ancestor was bamboo.”

Edison used the bamboo for several structures in his home, including in 1880 when he used a bamboo-derived filament for his incandescent light bulb, extending its life from 40 hours to almost 1,200. Jim is enthusiastic by the possibilities in the plant world, from reinforcing structures (Edison used bamboo to reinforce his pool) to alternative fuel sources.

“Every day is a good reason for getting up. The plants are just giving us a clue if we pay attention,” said Jim.

Mr. Agave

A native grower for more than 40 years, Jim and his wife Emily manage two small growing operations—Plants4Life in Gainesville, focused on growing native plants, and the Agave Land Nursery in Lacrosse. A self-described garden designer and horticulture advisor, Jim’s expertise in southern gardening has been honed by his personal involvement in plant research.

Jim views the world of plants as overflowing with possibilities. Driven by his quest for knowledge, Jim readily delves into new projects and regularly welcomes new additions to his garden center. His adventure in agaves took flight when Grandiflora Nurseries in Gainesville contacted Jim to see if he would be interested in growing *Agave americana*. Jim accepted this prospect and went on a rescue mission to a local hospital, saving hundreds of *Agave americana* from being discarded. As he became more involved with growing agaves, his passion grew, developing the nickname of “Mr. Agave.” Today, Jim has become the proud parent of hundreds of agaves, including one where he created his own hybrid.

“About three years ago, I had two mother agaves—a Green Goblet and a Whale Tongue—that bloomed at the same time. These two different agaves bloomed every day for three weeks, and so I got up in a step ladder and cross pollinated the two flower sets,” said Jim. “I received about 3,000 seeds from the pollination, which out of those I received about 300 new agave cultivars. The Whale Tongue was polycarpic and so continued to live after flowering, while some of the children are currently two to three times bigger than their mother.”

Passion for plants

Agaves to Jim are a chemical cauldron of possibilities, from a sweetener to an alternative fuel source. Currently, Jim is involved with two research projects involving agaves—one is in promoting agaves as cellulose fuel with National Energy and another is using agaves as a fire-wise landscape.

Agaves, aloes, sedums and others in the succulent class are a natural fire-wise solution. The University of Florida promotes growing plants with thick succulent leaves for Floridian landscapes. It’s the high moisture content in the leaves that makes this family an excellent plant for areas that are fire prone.

Not one to turn down a plant, Jim’s adopted agave family continued to expand until there was a period when even Jim agreed that he may have had too many.

“I used to grow so many agaves that there was no room to put them here in the hacienda,” he said. Jim is fascinated with the diverse biology amongst all of the plant family, but holds a particular fondness for those

that are native to Florida. One of his favorites is the Octopus agave, *Agave vilmoriniana*, which grows to about 4 ft. After this agave's bloom stock appears, little tiny plants appear all along it and the cycle of life begins again.

Another favorite is the terrestrial native orchid, *Habenaria quinqueseta*, which was bestowed as a gift to Jim. "According to Google, we are the only place that offers this plant for sale. I've been trying to make it less rare," said Jim. This orchid is fairly low maintenance, requiring only shade and well-drained soil. At the end of August, the orchid showcases a magnificent stalk with white flowers speckled throughout.

Plants = Peace

Jim is more than happy to share his expertise with those who will offer an ear. Throughout the years, he's helped establish hundreds of small family food gardens, food networks and even landscapes focused on pollination. Jim strongly believes plants are the tool that will help bring people together for food and eventually peace.

"On the border between Manitoba, Canada, and North Dakota, United States, there is the longest unfortified border. This is the home of a 2,339 acre botanical International Peace Garden," shared Jim. "I would love to see a world in which there were peace gardens at every border."

Jim has a strong belief in the power of humanity and the value of creating peace together. He has several ideas on how to spread his message of peace from installing peace poles (a large pole which has the word peace written in several languages) to developing a website where people share horticulture clichés. His family motto is simple: "Make it better"—a principle that Jim has personally embodied.

"We want people to look forward with a green compass and bring other people with them. My family has created a coat of peace, a symbolic flag of images to commemorate and acknowledge the concept of peace," said Jim. He has also adopted the archived U.S. solar lobby as his personal symbol.

"The image looked like a sunflower, but if you looked closely, it was a group of individuals that had their hands up holding each other," said Jim. "It creates this circular motive. The idea is that when we work together, it's when we begin to bloom." **GT**

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