

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

8/31/2017

Venturing Off the Beaten Path

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Curious and passionate, horticulturist and explorer Pamela Koide-Hyatt's career is guided by her passion for the tillandsia genus.

Although Pamela didn't grow up in the horticulture industry, there's no question that botany is a path she was destined to follow. It was during her work as a registered nurse at a senior home that Pamela planned a hiking vacation in Mexico. Little did she know that this journey would provide the inspiration for a new career.



Pictured: Pamela with Ed Stofbergen from Stofbergen Plant Company, a Bromeliad Nursery in Holland, standing in front of benches growing Tillandsia Samantha.

During the trek, Pamela ventured through the mountains and canyons of Mexico, where she stumbled upon an unusual plant: *Tillandsia caput-medusae*. Enthralled by this specimen, Pamela returned home, focused on unveiling anything she possibly could about this plant. This was the early '80s and as Pamela attempted to classify and understand more about this plant, she realized that she'd ventured into uncharted territory.

And so, Pamela returned to Mexico to discover more about this specific plant and continue investigating the terrain for new species. During this time, Pamela said it was easy to both explore and discover new species abroad, and import the plants for education and propagation. Pamela had discovered a new world, one that prompted her to leave her career in nursing and open her own backyard nursery. Bird Rock Tropicals in La Jolla, California, was aptly named after a local rock in the region, and this new venture provided the perfect environment for Pamela to learn more about tillandsia and horticulture in general.

Beautifully situated by the Pacific Ocean, including the higher elevation and cooler climates, Bird Rock Tropicals provides the ideal environment to nurture and grow tillandsia and other varieties of bromeliads.

“I started growing from seeds and began hybridizing, which, depending on the plant, can take several years,” said Pamela. “Offsets can mature in about two years, but to do that you need to maintain a large mother stock.”

Being close to the coast has also provided an excellent source of water. “If you have good water,” said Pamela, “you can grow just about anything.”

Over the years, both Pamela’s knowledge of tillandsias and other bromeliads and Bird Rock Tropicals expanded. Her travels have led to discovering between 15 to 20 species new to science—some of which were published by Pamela and some published by others. The nursery expanded to 15 employees and featured a variety of plants from the bromeliad family, their own landscape line and knick-knacks, all of which were sold to the local community.



Pictured: Tillandsia Samantha growing in one of Pamela Koide-Hyatt's shade houses.

As time went by, Pamela’s passion for tillandsia continued to grow, and she devoted much of her time to learning about existing species and cultivating new hybrids. The bromeliad industry has gone through vast changes in the last three decades, Pamela shared. In the beginning, it would have been extremely challenging to have 100 unique species as a collection. Today, collectors could easily find up to 400 through the Internet.

“I am fascinated by tillandsia and bromeliads,” said Pamela. “There has not been much written about them, but you will find them in the most interesting regions, from sea level to up in the Andes.” Hybridizing slow-growing tillandsia and other bromeliads is a long-term commitment, with some species taking decades to bring to market.

One such hybrid was Tillandsia Samantha, which took Pamela 20 years to bring to market. Samantha initially earned recognition in 2012, when it was shortlisted for plant of the year at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. In 2013, Tillandsia Samantha won FloraHolland’s coveted Glass Tulip award.

Traveling allows Pamela to not only discover new species, but see how the plants have adapted to environmental changes. The changes in the plant’s natural environment in the last 30 years, because of climate change and population shifts, has modified the plant species, she said.

“There is a lot of natural hybridization going on, partially because of a decrease in the natural environment,” said Pamela. “Little pockets of natural habitats are surrounded by deforestation and hummingbirds are pollinating everything.”

In the same tree, Pamela has found eight to 10 different hybrids. This is something that wouldn't have been seen decades ago.

"Plants are changing and evolving a lot faster than we would have [thought]," said Pamela. Although Pamela has had more experience observing this in Mexico, she's noticed similar adaptations in both Ecuador and Brazil.

When back in California, Pamela divides her time in between propagation and education.

"I've been lecturing about plants and how to grow and propagate to a variety of interest groups, including plant groups, garden clubs and to community members who are interested in learning how to use bromeliads in the Southern California landscapes," said Pamela.

There's a general lack of understanding on how to care for this species of plants, shared Pamela, which is why she created her "tillandsia cards" in 2014. These cards provide consumers with both an image and care information of the species, helping with both identification and maintenance. In 2016, she converted the cards to an online app through the Apple store.

Most recently, Pamela has partnered with Jeff Chemnick, owner of Mexico Nature Tours, to co-lead a tillandsia-bromeliad ecotour. The ecotours provide another opportunity for Pamela to share her passion and knowledge with others.

"It's exciting to take people into the field and to show them not only the variety of species in nature, but their habitats and how they've adapted to the changes in the environment," she said.

Today, Bird Rock Tropicals has streamlined its business model to focus on the less-typical varieties of tillandsia and on hybridizing new ones.

"At this point, I'm down to just under an acre with only a couple of employees," said Pamela. "It has definitely become more of a passion."

Her current market is geared towards individuals who are collectors, looking to acquire new hybrids of tillandsia. With more than three decades of research under her belt, Pamela continues to be a leader in education and hybridization of the genus tillandsia. **GT**

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