GROWERTALKS

Features

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Monrovia: Growers Who Really Know Retail

Chris Beytes



2. Harry, with nursery stock in large cans. He was a pioneer in plant breeding and patenting.
3. A Rosedale's retail catalog from 1956, the year Harry Rosedale died. It lists six LA-area locations.

Shipping in the 1950s. Note the tin can pots. Are they painted green? Looks like it—that doesn't look like rust.

Walk into nearly any retail garden center in America, head out into the tree and shrub area and you'll likely find those unmistakable green pots with the gold band with "Monrovia" emblazoned across it—a strong and respected brand, with tight connections to independent retailers and the end consumer.

But that's not surprising once you learn that Monrovia's founder, Harry Edvig Rosedale, had one foot in retail from the very beginning. In fact, the Danish immigrant, who came to the U.S. from Copenhagen in 1923, eventually presided over at least a half a dozen retail garden center locations around Los Angeles called Rosedale's Nurseries, even as he built Monrovia into the venerable wholesale nursery institution it is today.

Let's go back 103 years to learn more.

A new business, a flood and a rebirth

Directly after settling in California in 1923, Harry began his American nursery career at California Nursery Company (now the site of California Nursery Historical Park), then moved on to Armstrong Nurseries, the forerunner to today's Armstrong Garden Centers. It's documented that he spent two years doing propagation for Armstrong, but back then was it likely that every employee pulled their weight, whether it was propagation, watering, loading trucks or waiting on retail customers. As a young immigrant, Harry likely did it all.

But we also know Harry had a creative, entrepreneurial mind that was probably stifled by working for others, which is why in 1926 he joined with another Danish-American nurseryman, Louis Deigaard, to establish the firm Rosedale & Deigaard on a 10-acre site in Monrovia, California. When a third partner, H.V. Larson, joined them in 1930, they incorporated the business as Monrovia Nursery Co. Harry bought out Mr. Larson in 1932 and Mr. Deigaard in 1933 to become sole proprietor of the nursery. (It's unknown what became of Mr. Larson, but Louis Deigaard went on to found Deigaard Nurseries.)

Despite the Great Depression, one assumes business was good for Monrovia Nursery Co. until March of 1938, that is, when disaster struck. Two giant Pacific storms swept across Los Angeles, bringing a year's worth of rain in four days. Monrovia, located on the banks of Santa Anita Creek, was literally washed away.

Undeterred, Harry rebuilt within 18 months, this time a half mile away on a 10-acre portion of the former Pioneer Nursery, a 100-acre operation dating back to the 1870s that had been sold and broken up a few years earlier. A 1939 newspaper report of Monrovia's reopening noted that Harry also had "growing yards" on Grand Avenue in Monrovia for subtropical ornamentals and on Walnut Avenue in nearby Arcadia for "wholesale ornamentals, though a large retail business is done as well"—proof that Harry was indeed a retail grower (that, plus a photograph of the new business with seed racks out in front). An additional quote from the reporter stated, "Fall activity of the nursery business starts, says Mr. Rosedale, when school begins. Parents get their youngsters off to school and then get to thinking about their gardens and want to get new stuff in before the rain comes."

But what about the aforementioned garden centers he owned? In his obituary, Harry is credited with being founder and president of both Monrovia Nursery and Rosedale's Nurseries. We know the Monrovia history; Rosedale's Nurseries', however, is much less clear. The Monrovia website says nothing about it. But some sleuthing revealed a newspaper clipping from 1946 about the grand opening of Rosedale's Nursery on West Huntington Drive in Monrovia, which the reporter says, "sets the pattern for beauty in nursery establishments in California." Rosedale's was a partnership between Harry and two other gentlemen, Norman Gray and Howard Past. A 1956 Rosedale's catalog reveals an artist's rendering of a stylish modern façade and a list of six locations: Monrovia, Glendale, Encino, Los Angeles, Pomona and La Harra. It even had a tag touting "Rosedale's Pedigreed Plants"—an early nod to branding.

Alas, all of Rosedale's locations were closed by the early '70s so Monrovia could focus on its ever-expanding wholesale business. But for a few decades, Monrovia played a direct role in Southern California's post-war home and garden boom. And in a satisfying full-circle moment, in 1974 Armstrong's bought Rosedale's remaining three stores, giving them eight locations (today they have 27).

The wholesale nursery continued to expand in the post-war boom, as well, outgrowing its Monrovia location. In 1952, Harry moved the business to a new site in Azusa, a short distance east. Over the next 50 years, it grew into the 500-acre nursery and headquarters for the company until they built new locations in Visalia, California, and Dayton, Oregon. They sold most of the land in Azusa in 2004.

A "can"-do attitude

We mentioned Harry's creativity and entrepreneurial spirit earlier. While growing the business, he was also growing plants—millions of them—many from his own breeding program. In fact, Monrovia was the first major U.S. grower to trademark a plant—Pyracantha Rosedale in 1941 (today, Monrovia holds well over 200 patents and trademarks).

But, remember, this was before cheap and easy plastic pots. Back then, most nursery stock was dug in the field

and wrapped in burlap (B&B). Or they used wood crates. Smaller plants might be grown in heavy and fragile terra cotta pots.

Harry, recognizing the need for uniform, lightweight containers, started looking for options and he found one in war-surplus tin cans, which were cheap and abundant. They came in a range of sizes, from small to large, round and square. Punch drain holes in the side and you have a cheap, light nursery container. Harry wasn't the only grower to discover this, but he may have been one of the largest, and for years Monrovia and other nurseries made use of metal cans until plastic pots came along. Tin cans laid the groundwork for modern containerized nursery production.

The downside? Metal rusts and Harry knew that rusty pots would make a poor impression at retail. So he painted them. And the color he chose? You guessed it—green. No Monrovia branding yet, of course—that wouldn't come for 50 years—but Monrovia's signature green color was born on those tin cans.

A culture of innovators

Alas, Harry wouldn't live long enough to enjoy the success of the businesses he founded and the innovations he spawned; he passed away in 1956 from heart problems at the too-young age of 53. His sons Harry, Jr. and Miles were just 7 and 5. Thankfully, two of Harry's key employees were positioned to take over the business and shepherd it through the 1980s: Martin Usery, the eventual president and CEO who got his start as a "water boy" in 1931; and Clifton Comstock, who joined Monrovia around 1951 and rose to head of sales and marketing.

The second generation of leadership came from Martin's son, Bruce, who was hired in 1968 as production manager and rose to president and CEO; and Harry's son Miles, who joined the family business full time in 1981 after a brief career as a corporate attorney (today he's co-Chairman of the Board). Today, the third generation continues to keep the Monrovia tradition alive—Harry's granddaughter Emily Rosedale-Kousoulis is a Monrovia brand ambassador and member of the Board (along with two of Martin's granddaughters). And while he may not be a family member, current president and CEO Jonathan Pedersen has devoted his career to the nursery industry, including leadership roles at Bailey Nurseries and Linder's Greenhouses.

Harry's innovative spirit has lived on through the decades. For instance, the company developed a groundbreaking research department in the 1950s: a key innovation focused on the importance of soil mixes, and today Monrovia grows in more than 40 customized recipes that include mycorrhizae. The company pioneered methods for helping gardeners be successful, including the Plant Finder, introduced in garden centers in the 1980s to help home gardeners choose the best plants for their needs. Today, there's an online version at Monrovia.com.

And, of course, the plants! Harry Rosedale's commitment to bringing better genetics to market continues to this day. From that first patent in 1941 to the top 100 Landscape Legends, hand-pruned, living-sculpture topiaries and distinctive new varieties, every plant is selected, trialed and grown to the highest standards.

One recent selection is the perfect choice to mark Monrovia's 100th anniversary. Monrovia calls Centennial Ruby Hydrangea the "jewel of the celebration," with deep, ruby-red blooms that darken as the flowers mature. A limited edition of 5,000 will be available in 2026, each with a numbered tag.

Would Monrovia be the iconic powerhouse it is today if Harry hadn't spent so much time in retail? Perhaps. However, it's likely those gardeners he sold plants to every day greatly influenced his work in plant selection, breeding … even painting tin cans green! That history of innovation continued after his untimely passing and continues today as Monrovia begins its second century. **GT**