GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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# In Memoriam: Evelyn Weidner

*Chris Beytes*

The industry has lost a pioneering woman who probably never saw herself as one: Evelyn Weidner of Weidner's Gardens in Encinitas, California, passed away May 15 at the venerable age of 96 (she almost made it to 97; her birthday was May 28). She was able to spend her last days in her home at La Costa Glen, which was her wish—no doubt surrounded by flowers and plants. Evelyn was an active and enthusiastic pillar of the San Diego County floriculture world for some 60 years, loved and respected by everyone.

Evelyn was born into the business—her father, Simon Peterson, was a horticulturist who grew pansies at home for the park where he worked. Her mother, Victoria, decided to sell some of those pansies at a local farmers market. Finding success, they opened a small nursery in Fresno, selling pansies and California native plants. That's where Evelyn cut her retail nursery teeth. By age 7 she showed a knack for charming the customers—a talent she never lost.

Her late husband, Bob, was also a horticulturist; together, they ran Buena Park Greenhouses. When that business was sold, Evelyn and Bob (now with four children) tried retirement, but, you know, plants get into your blood. So in 1973 they opened Weidner's Gardens, which became famous for its dig-your-own flowers. In fact, in 2023, Evelyn wrote on their website, "50 years ago, Weidner's Gardens started as The Begonia Gardens with a huge patch of 'Dig Your Own Begonias.' We opened July 5, 1973. It was just me, a card table, some money in a cigar box and a flyer that said, 'Visit the Begonia Gardens and you will be our very first customers!'"

Evelyn is also one of the reasons the Proven Winners brand exists. It was she and Bob who were collecting an offbeat assortment of genetics with the help of their friend Ludwig Kientzler. Ludwig would come to America to visit customers, such as the Ecke Ranch, a neighbor of the Weidners. While in the neighborhood, he'd drop in on Bob and Evelyn.

"If we had something new, we gave it to Kientzler," Evelyn recalled. "And if Kientzler had something new, he gave it to us."

In the early 1990s, Kientzler's Garry Grueber and Weidner's head grower John Rader had the idea to develop a network of like-minded young plant companies that would work together to jointly trial, produce and market exciting new plant varieties. John bought Weidner's liner business from Evelyn (Bob had passed away in

1988), named it EuroAmerican Propagators, and in 1992 joined with Four Star Greenhouses in Michigan and Pleasant View Gardens in New Hampshire and founded Proven Winners.

Oh, as for the brand name? It came straight from the Weidner's young plant tagline: "Proven Winners in New Plants." John Rader was considering it, but thought it too corny. That is, until Evelyn's daughter, Mary, suggested "Proven Winners." John has said, "It's always embarrassing for me to admit that initially back then I thought the name was corny!" **GT**