

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Behind the Business: Keeping the Ecke Heritage Alive

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This edition of Behind the Business is unique in that it looks not backwards but forwards, and not at a company but at a brand. Yet the entire story is based in history—that of the Paul Ecke Ranch, which, beginning in the early 1920s, created, shaped and dominated the poinsettia market.

Pictured: Eighteen-year Ecke veteran Ruth Kobayashi will continue the tradition of poinsettia excellence, with an emphasis on unique colors and new flower and plant forms.

Paul Ecke III sold the third-generation business in 2012 to the Dutch company Agribio. In 2013, Agribio merged with German breeding company Dümmer. The Ecke's Encinitas, California, land the ranch has occupied since 1923 was sold, with Dümmer now leasing greenhouses back from the new landowner. Ecke went from being an internationally renowned independent breeding company to a brand name with a few strokes of a pen.

Some might think the Ecke story ends there. Sam Kimling's job is to not let that happen.

Sam, an Ecke technical specialist at the time of the sale, has been named Brand Manager for Ecke by Dümmer. Sam is charged with keeping Ecke poinsettias top-of-mind with growers and consumers. He'll do that by tapping into the company's vast heritage, directing its breeding program, and developing and implementing sales and marketing plans. "There's tremendous brand loyalty with Ecke," says Sam. "I think that's very important for Dümmer not to lose."

That heritage begins with breeding. While some may have expected Dümmer to merge the Ecke and Red Fox (Dümmer's European poinsettia brand) breeding programs, they are instead keeping them separate, even encouraging competition between the two. (They will share resources, including cutting production in El Salvador; Ecke's own production in Guatemala has been closed.) The Ecke breeding program (and their

valuable and historical collection of germplasm) remains in Encinitas, in the hands of veteran Ecke breeder Ruth Kobayashi.

Sam recalls an article he saw recently from Family Circle magazine, circa 1946, profiling Paul Ecke Sr. and the innovative breeding work Ecke was doing at the time in cut poinsettias. “I see Ruth honoring that tradition,” he says. “Not looking backwards or looking at what competitors are doing, but looking forward at what the market needs. If you look into the breeding lines that Ruth has done, it’s hybrids, it’s euphorbias, its things like Ice Punch. It’s finding solutions for growers with varieties like Prestige, which defined what V-shaped architecture is, solving big problems for growers, like stem breakage.”

Sam says expect that to continue, with more novelties, hybrids, unique flower presentation and product forms. “She’s cracked the code on different ways to breed,” says Sam, “to give us different results like Luv U Pink and sports of that. Varieties that have new possibilities that we never thought of, like cold tolerance. It’s quite exciting.”

The second element of Ecke’s heritage is poinsettias as a valued holiday gift.

“Everybody gets hung up on price, but I think what was unique to Ecke was creating value with the genetics, trying to break the mold that poinsettias are just another commodity,” says Sam. “When you’ve got something special and unique and customers are willing to pay more for it, and you can market it and brand it differently, why not?” Consider Ice Punch, which combined unique genetics with special packaging and a \$1-per-cutting price tag. Or Winter Rose, which introduced an entirely new bract form to the world.

“Colors, pots, the way we present them, the forms they’re in ... a lot of things Ecke had done in the past and that had gone away are coming back. Mini [poinsettia] production and creative packaging ideas around that ... I see tremendous interest in that from retailers and consumers, so yes, you’ll continue to see marketing programs and packing ideas coming from us. That’s something the retailers expect from us. We’re constantly trying to push the envelope of what’s possible.”

That includes another piece of Ecke heritage: supplying poinsettias for the Tonight Show, which they’ve done for at least 30 years. On Monday, December 9, host Jay Leno publicly thanked Ecke for the beautiful poinsettias on the set. “The Tonight Show is one avenue,” Sam says, “but there are many more like that that I’m exploring.”

Finally, while Sam is shaping Ecke’s future, he also wants to preserve the company’s history and share it with a new generation of growers and consumers, many of whom don’t know how the Ecke family built the poinsettia business. “The old guard does, but the younger generation doesn’t,” Sam says. “I don’t want the industry to lose that history.” **GT**