

Chrysanthemums in California by Ted King

King's Mums – 1952 – 2007.

Proprietors Ted King and daughter Lanna.

I was born 1920 in Hayward California, a San Francisco Bay Area city, and reared on a large squab production pigeon ranch. I attended Cal Poly for 2.5 years until World War II, when I entered the Navy. I studied agriculture inspection and subjects such as entomology and plant pathology which were to become of keen interest in later years. It wasn't until I was discharged from the Navy that Chrysanthemums caught my eye. While working for a pest control firm on a routine route, I observed large flowered yellow mums tied around four or five street trees in magnificent bloom.

Of course I asked if I could take some cuttings, and they obliged. Another inspiration was to visit the large Chrysanthemum display at Lakeside Park in Oakland California. Mostly small flowered types of their own seedlings, but most impressive was the cascade stand. This must have been 12 feet high with 2 layers of cascades giving the impression of extremely long specimens. The park department held an auction of stools each spring after taking their cuttings. This is where I obtained many of my early cultivars. Among them was Garnet King, (4A-R, 1928) and I believe it is still being grown today in the U.S.

The growing of mostly large flowered Chrysanthemums gradually became a consuming hobby. In an effort to find other people with similar interests and share their experience in growing, I looked to the Superintendent of the Lakeside mum show. Mr. Ammerman gave me a list of people that had a keen interest in the park's mum show and among them was Dr. Ira B. Cross, a professor of economics at the University of California. He was to become the first president of the Chrysanthemum Study Club of the East Bay. This organization was later to become the Northern California Chrysanthemum Society, 1952 – 2002. Dissolved when there were not enough members to carry on duties any longer.

My occupation during all these years was conducting a tree and garden spraying service where contract customers were serviced from my spray truck quarterly for what ever insect or disease prevailed. Eventually, my collection of mums increased to the point where I was no longer considered an amateur and no longer allowed to exhibit competitively at local shows. In the U.S., when the revenue from growing exceeds production costs, you are no longer allowed to compete with amateurs. However, I was always happy to exhibit my new introductions at local shows.

In 1981 we were advised that our property in Castro Valley was needed for an expansion of near by Highway 580. At this time the Chrysanthemum business was taking more and more time and the spraying service less. This led to selling the spraying service and moving the nursery 85 miles east to the Central Valley area in Clements. This is 35 miles South of Sacramento, our state capital. We bought 20 acres of bare rolling land, studded with large Valley Oak trees, and plenty of rabbits and gophers. We proceeded to construct a new home, horse barn for Morgan show horses, put in a well for water, and constructed 4 greenhouses and a shop. This was a busy time, traveling 85 miles each way to observe construction while instructing the new owner of the spraying service.

Our new location in Clements, a hot dry area of the San Joaquin Valley, was quite a change in climate from the cool temperatures of the Bay Area. This move only served to illustrate

how adaptive the Chrysanthemum is. A major change was a later bloom date by as much as 2 weeks.

In 1983, my daughter Lanna became a full partner in the business. Lanna has been working with me since childhood, and soon became our computer person as well as helping with propagation and the primary person filling orders.

I have been an active member of N.C.S. (U.S.) since 1948. I served as director and as classification chairman for 12 years. I have been a patron of N.C.S. – U.K. for many years. Was exclusive agent for H. Woolman, Ltd., in the U.S. and Canada for many years. We have exchange programs with Seaton in Australia, Harry Lawson and Gordon Jones in the U.K. and have been able to secure many fine Japanese cultivars through a friend in Japan. I have attended the late show in the U.K. when it was held in London at the old train station as the guest of Harry Randal and Alan Wren. More recently I have attended the early national show in Stafford and the show at Harrogate. I must admit that these shows were overwhelming and we have nothing to compare with here in the U.S.

Among the cultivars originating in the U.K. that have been winners here and carried at the nursery are the following:

Alexis and Apricot Alexis (sport), Candid, Derek Bircumshaw, Doreen Statham, Fireflash, George Couchman, Gillette, Heather James, Lake Landers, Margaret Howells, paint Box, Parador, Pretty Polly, Purple Light, Rebecca Walker, Suzanne Etheridge, Billy Bell & Yellow Billy Bell (sport).

Perhaps of interest is our growing system and materials. Soil here is shallow and rocky. We bring in our planting mix of 80% fine ¼" fir bark, 10% sand, 10% saw dust. No soil! Irrigation of our mother stock and display area is by plastic drip system with 2 inch emitters. We use constant fertilizer through our drip system and at present use 20-9-20 + minor elements at a 200 to 1 ratio. I have used a Smith Measure mix injector for over 40 years.

In the summer and fall, 6,000, 6.5 inch pots of disbuds and spray types are planted for fall sales and hand watered daily. We have no rain here from mid may until mid October. Our insect program has been with one of the Chloronicotine systemic insecticides, Tristar now and previously Marathon. We also use a biopesticide growth regulator Azadirachtin called Azatin in the U.S. This is a neem product from India. For a fungicide, we occasionally use a copper product that is systemic called Python 27. Mites (mainly two spotted) have been effectively controlled with Bifenthrin called Floramite in the U.S.

I don't know if the plant protein product called Messenger is yet available in the U.K., but we think that this is one of the most important findings in plant science in years. Discovered some 14 years ago by scientists at Cornell University, Messenger is a plant protein (Harp-N-Tek. tm.) that has an unusual property that activates a plant's immune system. This plant protein was isolated from the bacterial disease 'Fire Blight', a common disease of the apple family. The application of Messenger as a spray or drench is like our taking a shot for the flu. Safety wise, Messenger is very safe and can be used up to the day of harvest on fruits and vegetables. We had a case of this material stored in a locked storage area and field mice found it to be very tasty! We now store it in the refrigerator. I have found that the continual use of this product has generally increased the health of our mums to the point where cultivars which were to be discarded because of health problems have been revived to the point of general good health. And because of Messenger, we are now using about half of the fertilizer that we were previously using. Plants are more efficient and look just as

good as ever. I don't know if it is our use of insecticide or Messenger, but we have not had to spray from mid April until early August. This is the longest insect free period we have ever experienced. One of the amazing qualities of Messenger is that plants are extremely sensitive to it. We apply this product through our fertilizer injector in addition to fertilizer. We use as little as 2 ounces of Messenger to 50 gallons of fertilizer concentrate and the injector dilutes at a ratio of 100 to 1. It seems unreal that such a small amount can have such dramatic results.

Sadly, I must face the fact that at age 87 I can not keep up the pace and have decided to sell the Chrysanthemum business. Of course I will continue growing, but at a much slower pace. This has been the love of my life and I will continue to contribute what ever I can to the development of Chrysanthemums.

Footnote from Harry Lawson: I requested Ted King to write a brief history about himself and Chrysanthemums, he was delighted to do so. He has been for the past 40 years a leading Chrysanthemum nursery in the United States.

Regarding the product 'Messenger' - Ted gave me a sample of the messenger, I can see it is the best and safest insecticide, I have ever used.

Regards,
Harry