



Kurt Ellison

Kee Kitayama tending his roses

Watsonville flower grower dies

Kee Kitayama's leadership made him 'irreplaceable'

By LARAMIE TREVINO
and LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITERS

Watsonville's Kee Susumu Kitayama, considered the largest flower producer in the nation, drowned Saturday night at Sunset State Beach, the Santa Cruz County Coroner's office reported.

Kitayama, 64, was found in the surf line at 10:45 p.m. by his son, John, and a friend of John's. Family members began searching for Kitayama when he didn't return from an after-dinner walk on the beach. He had left about 8 p.m.

The coroner listed drowning as the apparent cause of death pending an autopsy, which will be conducted today. Kitayama was found fully clothed on a flat stretch of beach.

Named "Farmer of the Year"

by the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau last summer, the second-generation flower grower helped demystify the subject of greenhouses for many, industry leaders said.

In recent years, Kitayama's visibility grew as he traveled the state in his role as chairman of the steering committee that late last year succeeded in getting the California Cut Flower Commission established through the state legislature.

During the formation period Kitayama worked closely with Assemblyman Sam Farr, who this morning called Kitayama's death "a tragic loss."

When the legislature convenes next year Farr said he will adjourn a session in Kitayama's memory and draft a resolution in his honor.

Jeff Brothers, president of the Farm Bureau, speaking by telephone from Sacramento this morning, said he was "devastated" by the news of Kitayama's death.

"Kee is one of those irreplaceable people in a community," Brothers said.

Kitayama, a native of Bainbridge Island, Wash., grew up there except for the period when his family was sent to relocation camps in California and Idaho. When he wasn't attending class at the center, Kitayama sewed camouflage nets.

But he said he wasn't bitter about the experience and maintained a positive outlook.

He served in the U.S. Army and with the occupation forces in Japan, then attended Ohio State

University, from which he graduated with a horticultural degree in 1952.

Along with his three brothers, Kitayama opened Kitayama Brothers Greenhouses in Union City before relocating to Watsonville, where he opened the San Andreas Road flagship of a three-site operation with nearly 1 million square feet in greenhouses and acreage.

Kitayama served on the boards of Roses Incorporated and the Floral Trade Council and was chairman of the International Farmers Aid Association exchange program and past president of the Watsonville Japanese American Citizens League.

He leaves his wife, Keiko, of

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Watsonville; his son, John, of Los Angeles; four daughters, Diane, of Los Angeles, Kathy, of Belize, Central America, Kristine, of Seattle, and Joyce, of Watsonville; three brothers, Tom and Ray, both of Union City, and Ted, of Santa Clara; and two sisters, Yoshiko Nakata, of Washington, and Mar-

tha Kawanami, of San Jose.

The funeral is scheduled for Friday at 7 p.m. at Westview Presbyterian Church. Burial will take place Saturday at 10 a.m. at Pajaro Valley Memorial Park.

Friends may call Thursday from 2 to 4 p.m. at Davis Memorial Chapel.

The family prefers contributions to the Special Olympics Memorial Fund.