

# Sweet smell of success fades for Capitola orchids

## Shaffer's Tropical Gardens to close

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Shaffer's Tropical Gardens, a Capitola nursery known around the world for its orchids, is closing its doors.

Shaffer's belonged to a "triangle" of commercial gardens that once drew out-of-towners to Capitola.

"There used to be three of us," said Skip Antonelli, of Antonelli Bros. Begonia Gardens. "They'd go to all three in a day. That was all through the '50s and '60s."

One of the two begonia growers, Vetterles, dropped out of the business in the early '70s, Antonelli said. Now Shaffer's is bowing out.

The steamy, bright greenhouses, an acre of delicate blooms and exotic plants, have stood on 41st Avenue for 48 years. Now it seems the nursery, one of the last rural patches on the avenue, will make way for development.

Almost all flower growers face rising labor and heating costs, but those near Capitola have to contend with rising property values as well. Properties have risen so high that local businesses must be much more profitable than orchid-growing, flower growers said.

Staying in the orchid and exotic plant business today is "basically running very hard to break even," said Richard Shaffer, son of Keith Shaffer, who helped start the business in 1937.

When Keith and his brother, Hal, bought the 3½-acre lot at the tail end of the Depression, they paid \$200 an acre for it.

The mild climate, so perfect for growing flowers, began to draw more and more residents to the area. The story of Capitola began to change.

"If this was developed with shops and offices, the rent per month would exceed the income of the orchid business per year," said Richard Shaffer, who has run the business for the last 13 years.

Father, son and another partner have put the Shaffer's property up for sale, and Richard is now selling much of the stock.

Members of local orchid societies and other local growers say they are sad to see the business go.

"They're going to be missed," said Pat Antonelli, Skip's father and one of the founders of the business. "There's only a limited amount of places a visitor likes to see besides the beach. It was one of those places visitors enjoyed going to."



Richard and Keith Shaffer inspect pampered bloom.

Adriana Reyneri

Shaffer's played an important part in the childhood of John Ewing of John Ewing Orchids on White Road near Watsonville. Ewing, who grew up in Southern California, began collecting orchids when he was 6 years old. His hobby often brought him to Shaffer's during family trips to Santa Cruz.

The youngster looked on the tropical gardens, filled with a

variety of colored blooms, as "sort of like a candy store," he said.

"There were lots of different

colors," Ewing said. "It was exciting to come up and pick up some new things."

Keith and Hal began their

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business under the name "Shaffer Bros. Nursery," specializing in anthuriums, a red, waxy, heart-shaped flower with a prominent yellow spike.

Keith served as a World War II Navy pilot and after the war took up commercial flying for several years. Hal had died during the war, and his widow ran the business until 1950, when Keith took it over.

After the war, cheap air freight had made growing anthuriums in the United States unprofitable, so Keith switched to orchids.

"It looked like a good notch, a good place," Keith said.

But it took years of hard work to become established.

"The first seven years, we took three days off a year. We took Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's," he said. "We kept the nursery open by ourselves and raised two kids."

Keith and his wife, Elinor, recalled how they raised plants and ran the business in those days.

"He did the breeding and I did all the lab work," Elinor said.

Keith recalled, "She did all the bookkeeping and correspondence, too."

For 20 years, the family lived in a knotty-pine beach cabin behind the greenhouse. It had been built by Hal Shaffer for \$1,300 in 1937, and the family enlarged it.

The boys learned to drive on the private roads cutting through the surrounding strawberry fields, and Richard remembers riding his horse up 41st Avenue and across Highway 1, then a two-lane road. Only a stop sign marked the intersection.

The Shaffers concentrated much of their efforts on breeding more desirable plants.

Orchids start as seeds so light they float on the air. The plants take about five years from seed to blossom. As a result, breeding is a slow process.

"There's about 19,000 species of orchids. We selected one that needed work in hybridizing," Keith said.

"The first thing he did was try to breed in texture and size," Elinor said. "They finally got the white ones where they wanted. Then they started bringing in color."

Keith said, "We tried to breed out the stripes and hold the (solid) yellow color. Eventually, we accomplished that."

"We were very fortunate because we hit it early on," he added. "We were just about one step or two steps ahead of everybody."

Soon people around the country and the world began seeking the Shaffers' hybrids.

"We got to go all over the world with our orchids," Keith said. "We showed in London, Paris, South Africa and Sydney."

Shaffer was asked to ship pure white orchids for a royal Danish wedding in 1968 and

named the hybrid "Princess of Denmark."

The scope of the business soon called for a place at the greenhouse for entertaining the out-of-town guests.

The Shaffers built the "pink room," featuring a large indoor swimming pool, beautiful orchids and a kitchen. It served as a lunchtime stopover for many visitors.

"We used it for display. The orchid society of Sacramento and Bakersfield, they would come and have lunch there," Keith Shaffer said.

"They kind of made it a tour, a day's excursion," Elinor said.

Overnight guests could stay in bedrooms off to the side.

When Richard Shaffer took over in 1972, the market was beginning to change.

Skyrocketing natural gas prices and increasing labor costs in a labor-intensive business began chipping away at profits. Shaffer's success at popularizing certain types of orchids also began to work against the business.

"We were pushing everyone to grow phalaenopsis. We were so successful in getting people to grow them that welders and pharmacists and people with other jobs were growing them in their back yard," Keith said. "The competition grew so great, our piece of the pie grew smaller."

The house-plant business is becoming more competitive too, Richard said.

"The age of the Alpha-Beta, the K-Mart, shoving out plants is upon us. They're competing with us," Richard said. "They're basically closing out the Ma 'n' Pa shop."

He hopes to eventually open another orchid business, perhaps one based in both Watsonville and Hawaii, where certain costs would be lower.

"We're doing what we're doing because we enjoy the orchids," Richard said. "How many business are there where someone walks through the front door and says, 'What you're doing is beautiful?'"

Though Keith Shaffer said the orchid business had been fun, he expressed little sadness at seeing it go.

The elder Shaffer has managed to do many things besides running the flower business. He has served on school boards, belonged to service clubs and help found Cabrillo College.

Shaffer also had a hand in the area's growth. He said he developed an area known as the old Capitola Airport, which used to stretch between Kennedy and Park avenues and New Brighton Beach. House-lined streets now run through the area, bearing such names as Orchid Street and Elinor Street.

Shaffer said he also helped develop the old Blake Ranch, 44 acres bounded by 41st and 45th avenues and Capitola Road. He helped develop San Lorenzo Park Plaza in Santa Cruz as well. Shaffer Road off Highway 1 at Natural Bridges is named after him.