

Scotts Valley Cactus Gardens Include Many Exotic Plants

By Margaret Koch

There is something weird about a cactus.

With all the peculiar forms it takes it fascinates the eye, stimulates the curiosity — are those barbs really as stiff and sharp as they look?

And then — ouch. They are.

It's even kind of weird to find one of the largest cactus and succulent garden in the state of California right here in Santa Cruz county. Because when people hear the words "Santa Cruz" they see visions of tall redwoods, sandy beaches, green and gold hills. But not cacti.

At Grant's Cactus garden in Scotts Valley there are more than 1000 varieties of cacti and succulents, including individual plants that are rare, ancient, freaks of nature, fruit-bearing and poisonous.

The latter type is not for sale. Mr. and Mrs. Troy Mansker, owners of the nursery, have a fine specimen of the succulent *Euphorbia hermentiana* on display; natives of West Africa have used its highly poisonous juice to poison arrow and spear tips. Several other kinds of *Euphorbia* are not deadly but the Manskers won't sell them to people with children because the white, milky juice has been known to temporarily blind a person.

Mrs. Mansker had a problem when I asked her which she considered the rarest specimen in the nursery.

"Well, we couldn't replace this *Euphorbia neglecta*," she answered, pointing to a towering, spiny native of Ethiopia.

"And then there's the tiny *Eulychnia* from Chile—it has white furry stripes. We sell only one to a customer and as far as I know this is the first time it has been on the market."

She paused and smiled.

"We have rare hatchet plants from Mexico too — it's hard to say which is the rarest."

We walked slowly through lath houses lined with prickly plants while she pointed out "the old man with white hair," Giant Saguaro, Golden Barrel, Bishop's Cap, Golden Ball (their biggest seller and priced from 35 cents to \$6), *Opuntias* (there are 310 fruit-bearing types), Orchid cactus, Thanksgiving cactus, Christmas cactus (they will have a white one this year), and Easter Lily cactus.

Each of the latter types blooms in its appropriate season.

Then we visited the succulent collection where she pointed out the rare "lace" variety, the Star, the Aloes (some types are cultivated for medicinal use), the poisonous *Euphorbias* and the "Split Rock." The "rock" really looks

like one and "splits" open to bloom after which the two halves close up again.

Mrs. Mansker, who has taught botany classes as a hobby, has studied plants for years and has a wide knowledge of growing things. Many of the Manskers' customers are collectors. But there is a growing demand for the "care-free, less-water" type of gardening that a cactus collection makes possible. Mansker specializes in this type of landscaping and keeps a wide variety of the ingredients, including rock, pottery and figurines.

One plant the Manker DON'T have is the peyote—also known as "dumpling cactus," creator of

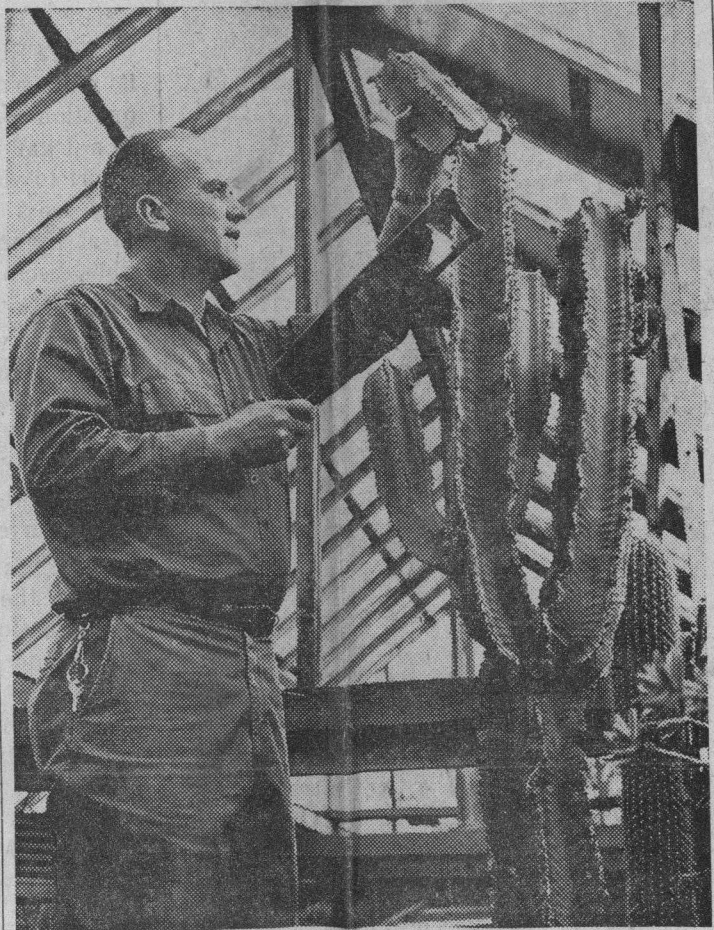
technicolor dreams. It's against the law to possess the narcotic plant which once figured prominently in desert Indian tribes' religious observances.

Although they don't have it, the Scotts Valley couple has had customers seeking it.

"One young fellow from up the peninsula phoned long distance, then drove down to look for himself. He was quite upset with us," she recalled.

And she still shakes her head in disbelief over another customer. That time it was a sweet little old lady who came in looking for peyote. She wanted to find out if it was really true that it caused those dreams in color.

Pruning A Rare Cactus



Pruning a cactus? That's right. Troy Mansker of Grant's Cactus garden, 5311 Scotts Valley drive, prunes a rare Ethiopian type for propagation purposes. Among their stock of cacti and succulents, which is the largest collections in the states, the Manskers list rare, unusual and poisonous types. Note: For curious people who have to "touch" the prickly plants, forget the tweezers and

get out the scotch tape. It works fine.

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