

Friday, September 23, 2005

Last modified Thursday, September 22, 2005 7:35 PM PDT

Unusual-looking and long-lasting blooms make this proteas a standout

By: LORELL FLEMING - Staff Writer

Proteas are not what you might call your garden-variety flowers.

But for growers in San Diego County, they can be.

At first look, you might not be so sure these are real flowers. The blooms are a definite departure from the soft leaves, broad petals and sweet smells that come to mind when most people think "flowers."

Protea blooms have cone-shaped flower heads and rigid, sometimes fuzzy, leaves. The Sunset Western Garden Book describes them as resembling "a large, very colorful artichoke or thistle." The flower heads vary in size from 2 inches to 12 inches in diameter.

Proteas bloom in a range of colors, including pink, red, and a pale yellow, and they don't have much of a scent. But they make up for their lack of perfume by being extremely long-lasting as cut flowers, often for several weeks.

They like it here

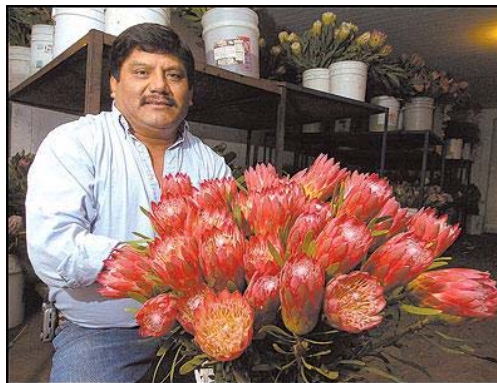
While this unusual, exotic-looking plant family can't be grown in many parts of the United States, protea plants and their blooms flourish in San Diego County home gardens and commercial farm operations, thanks to the Mediterranean-like climate found in many parts of this county.

Another reason the plants thrive here is that much of the soil is similar to soil in Southern Hemisphere locations - --- such as South Africa ---- where proteas grow naturally.

In fact, San Diego County and some ranches in the Santa Barbara area are the sites where the first proteas were grown in the United States about 40 years ago, according to the California Protea Association. Later, proteas were grown in Hawaii.

Before starting Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers LLC in Rainbow with his four siblings, Ismael "Mel" Resendiz had cultivated a fondness for the flower during his 20-year stint working at Zorro Protea Farms in San Diego, he said. When Zorro went out of business in 1999, he decided to start the protea business with his family.

"I fell in love with protea, mainly because it's kind of a rare flower around here that's very difficult to grow outside of the Southern Hemisphere," said Resendiz, 45, of Murrieta. "I like the look of protea flowers, too. The colors



Ismael Resendiz shows off a bundle of Guerna protea hybrid in the cooler of his Rainbow-area operation, Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers. Resendiz uses the nearby Gomez Creek area for his flower farm.

JOHN RAIFSNIDER For the North County Times

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and the shape are appealing to me."

The flowers' unusual look makes some first-time protea viewers pause.

"People ask if they are natural or artificial flowers," Resendiz explained. "Some people are afraid to touch the flowers. They think the flowers will stick them, like a cactus needle. But it is OK to touch the proteas."

At their farm at 5467 Rainbow Creek Road in Rainbow, the Resendiz brothers also grow Australian and South African filler flowers such as wax flowers. Of the 150 acres in their operation, 90 acres are dedicated to protea, Resendiz said.

Promoting protea

Chuck Stone of Escondido has been in the business of growing protea since 1992.

"Protea are a very small part of a very large niche of floral production in San Diego County," said Stone, president of the California Protea Association ---- the nonprofit corporation that serves as the promotions arm of the state's protea industry.

Last year, county growers produced 500 acres of protea, which had an estimated value of \$3 million, according to the annual crop report published by the county's department of agriculture, weights and measures.

Most commercial protea growers in this county sell to wholesalers, according to Stone. The wholesalers typically sell the flowers to other wholesalers, retail florists, as well as mass-market bouquet makers. Resendiz Brothers sells to wholesalers in about 30 American states and in various parts of Canada, Ismael Resendiz said.

Some sell directly to the public at farmers markets. "And some growers do a combination of those things," he added.

The California Protea Association is looking at a different way to promote protea purchases, Stone said.

"Until the last couple of years, we've done advertising in floral trade magazines. We have shifted our focus to the floral trade shows, such as the American Institute of Floral Designers' Symposium," he added.

Proteas are also sold by retailers such as Costco and Boney's. These stores get proteas generally from the mass-market bouquet makers.

"We want to get protea into floral shops," Stone added. "We want to have demand increase commensurate to our ability to meet that demand."

Grow your own

The best time to plant proteas is in the fall and winter, between November and February, according to the California Protea Association.

It's best for home gardeners to start growing proteas from cuttings because they blossom sooner --- three years from cuttings versus about five years from seeds, Resendiz said.

The plants, which look like shrubs, are not very attractive until they bloom, he added.

These plants can grow as high as 20 feet tall. However, Resendiz recommends home gardeners prune them after they finish blooming. He suggests keeping the plant no taller than six feet, so it lasts longer and gives better blooms.

The ideal spot for planting? Well, proteas tend to thrive in well-drained soil such as decomposed granite and with full sun and good air circulation. Virgin soil with native brush is best. Avoid planting proteas with other garden flowers that need continuous damp soil and fertilizers with phosphorus. Also, avoid areas that have been fertilized with phosphorus or old grove spots contaminated with *Phytophthora cinnamoni*.

The California Protea Association discourages the use of fertilizers on these plants ---- especially phosphorus

or ammonium-nitrate-type fertilizers ---- because proteas have evolved to a point where they survive in soil with poor nutrients. However, growers who want to use fertilizers are advised to use a small amount of ammonium sulfate dissolved in water.

These flowers thrive with wet-and-dry cycles. The association suggests setting up a drip system. Water them once a week with about a gallon of water each week during cool months and more during the summer months. Put one dripper about two inches from the stem until the plant matures.

Then, remove that dripper, and put a dripper on each side about six inches from the stem. One gallon-per-hour drippers are usually used, according to the association.

To learn more about protea, log on to: www.californiaprotea.com.

Contact staff writer Lorell Fleming at (760) 731-5798 or lfleming@nctimes.com.

Resendiz Brothers, 5467 Rainbow Creek Road in Rainbow.