

Nursery Memories

Once again a year is ending—my excuse to think about ‘the olden days’ and share some more stories and memories of a nursery child. Even when quite young, my sisters and I were required to work in the family business. I guess it was a family tradition, since back in the 1930’s and 1940’s when my grandparents owned Carman’s Nursery (named for my grandfather, Hugh Carman) my dad and his three sisters all had to work in the nursery. I asked Aunt Marge about her work experience, and she told me about how there were favorite tools (a special trowel, the sharp shears, etc.) and whoever got out to work first had their pick of the good ones. It was usually her sister, my Aunt Marie who got to use the favorites since Marge *much* preferred to sleep in! Dad had a little more fun doing his nursery chores—he had permission to miss his first morning class at Los Gatos High so he could make nursery deliveries in the old pickup around the Santa Clara Valley.

During WWII my grandfather converted the nursery each spring to grow tomato transplants for the canneries. Raised beds were planted intensively with tiny seedlings. Since the seedlings were planted quite early in the season to give the canneries a head start on the growing season, a framework was built over the beds and covered nightly with linen sheets (regular bed sheets purchased from a department store) to protect the plants from frost. Sometimes kerosene lanterns were also lit to help keep the frost off. Aunt Marge still remembers the long board, studded with nails, that was used to mark the intended spot for each tomato seedling to be planted. Once the small plants were about 18” tall, they were dug and packed in mud in deep wood fruit boxes and then sold to the canneries to be planted out in their fields.

My sisters and I had our favorite tools to use in the nursery as well, but since we didn’t work the same hours, much of the squabbling was avoided. We all spent a lot of time in the greenhouse (at that time, truly a glass house) doing ‘cuttings’. We had wooden flats filled with a mixture of sand and perlite, moistened perfectly, so that a piece of sheet metal could cut into the medium and open a long, straight slice. Short lengths of the tips of plants (the cuttings) were placed in the slice, evenly spaced, and then the open slice was pressed closed. There were 10-20 cuttings per slice, 20-30 rows per flat, and yes, you’re right, it could get a little repetitive and tedious for a 14 or even a 20 year-old (always much better than weeding, however!) So we begged for, and got a radio. Let me remind you here, that this was the early 1970’s I’m talking about, no iPod, no Walkman. So the radio had a speaker in the greenhouse, but the tuner was in the office, therefore changing stations required two people, working together. My sister Diane’s favorite station at the time was KEEN, and, since she was older, she simply told me that I wasn’t allowed to change the station. In those days, some mornings and many afternoons the KEEN programming changed from music to baseball, broadcasting all the Oakland A’s games. By default, I became a well-informed A’s fan. To this day I remember the names of many of the World Series winning team members with their cute handlebar moustaches.

I still have fond memories of those days, which prompted me to impulsively enter a World Series contest this fall, despite not having listened to a baseball game this century (or for twenty five years before that...) Believe it or not, I picked the Giants in five, and won a box of plants!

At one time or another, nursery workers included immediate and extended family, as well as a high school boy and/or girl who worked after school and during the summer. Looking back, I feel a little sorry for those kids, because when I was little I followed them around like a puppy dog. I remember watching them mix the sand, sawdust and dirt for the potting mix, hand water the plants in big cans in the field, and weed, endlessly. Poor kids had to be nice to the boss's daughter! But some returned to visit, and we took great pleasure having known some great kids, as well as those employees who went on to fame and fortune after leaving the nursery. Howard Kaeding traded dirt for grease when he went on to found Kaeding Performance and become a racing legend. And singer songwriter Tom Jans thrilled us with his music (and looks) before joining up with Mimi Farina and recording the album *Take Heart*.

See you next year—more plants, I promise!

~*Nancy Schramm*

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