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The passionate propagator

Canby botanist Dan Heims goes far and wide looking for the freaks of nature.

By Oakley Brooks

Dan Heims is an artist with plants. But he'd be nowhere without his fishing skills.

Heims is one of Oregon's pre-eminent commercial botanists, with a worldwide speaking itinerary that rivals The Donald's and a test garden in Canby that would make the Impressionists jealous. Tucked behind the modest ranch-house headquarters of his Terra Nova Nurseries, the garden is awash in orange and full of striped leaves and pointy flowers. "Nobody goes back here," Heims says, rolling his minivan down the test plot drive on a recent fall day. That day lily over there with the striped leaves? "That could be the only one in the world like that," he says. The coreopsis with a delicate hint of a white flower, ready to burst onto the scene this spring? "They'll be a huge money-maker for us," says Heims, a stout oak of a man with a cherub's face and

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mischievous voice.

These new plants are often hybrids, formed when Heims or someone else literally takes a paintbrush and dusts one plant with another's pollen; the newbie with growing potential then gets pushed into a tissue-culture lab, where technicians with forceps and chemical augers coax along tiny green growth shoots.

Heims and the 63-member Terra Nova team have jiggered the look of hundreds of thousands of new plants and they've ended up introducing 500 plant varieties to the market. That includes a line of colorful jagged-leafed ground covers called Heuchera that have become so popular in temperate regions that when Heims dials up a little nursery somewhere in England now, they respond with "Ohhhh, Dan Heims. Right. You're the Heuchera chap."

But Heims' little secret is that most of these new discoveries — each worth hundreds of thousands of dollars — usually start not with a stroke of art but with a freak of nature, often appearing right in his own greenhouse as a slight variegation in a leaf or frill tucked in among thousands of plants. Heims is always casting about for these little variations. "I call it sport fishing. I'm always looking for a sport fish," says Heims, as he gently combs a row of young plants in his greenhouse. "The biggest rush is breaking the rules and introducing something that has never been out there before."

"It takes all kinds," says Ken Brown, who co-founded Terra Nova in 1992 with Heims and their wives, Jody Brown and Lynne Bartenstein. While Jody and Lynne keep tabs on an increasingly complex web of global accounts and royalties, Ken plays the straight-laced manager to rein in Heims, the free spirit. "It takes people who get excited by everything they see. People like Dan — he wants to get up every day and see something new."

The 53-year-old Heims will go far and wide looking for new plants, either to introduce commercially or for his collector's garden. The collector's tract, a winding stroll in the back of the test plot, is the crown jewel of Terra Nova. Here there are dozens of vivid, living, CO2-breathing tales from the farthest reaches of the globe, such as a rare kiwi from a peace mission to Hiroshima, or bitsy red shamrocks from the Tasmanian national

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collection, which fell into disrepair and dried out under a tree until Heims brought along his sterile carrying box and whisked them away.

The greatest catch of all, however, was in his own greenhouse. It was 1988, Terra Nova had not yet been formed and Heims was operating out of a backyard hothouse in Portland. He spied a Heuchera with variegated leaves and thin, red, bell-like flowers.

He called it “coral bells” and took it to the Perennial Plant Association annual meeting in Portland, where an Englishman named Rod Richards liked the looks of it and promised to peddle it back home. Soon after, royalties from coral bells produced enough seed money for Heims to begin Terra Nova. And they’ve never stopped. Coral bells, called “Snowstorm” on the market, have topped 1 million in unit sales.

The timing from the first round of royalties couldn’t have been better. After 20 years in the landscaping business, Heims’ back was giving out. (He’s been a plant fiend since his undergraduate days at the University of Oregon, when he taught landscaping classes and collected 1,200 exotics in his room.) Meanwhile, Brown, an old acquaintance with a lab science background, was also looking for something new. They built their first tissue-culture lab in the back of Brown’s house. Brown worked from 3 a.m. to noon at his day job in the meat-packing industry and then cultured small plants for Terra Nova in the afternoon. For a while, Heims grew plants under fluorescent lights in the basement of the Murder by the Book shop in Portland’s Multnomah Village.

By 1995, they’d made it to the rich soils of Canby, taking over an old nursery. Today, they have eight acres, right in the heart of growing country — there are 1,700 nurseries within a 50-mile radius. Meanwhile, in New Zealand, Holland, Germany and Chile, contract labs are propagating plants for Terra Nova. Direct sales come from all over North America, and royalties from around the planet; revenues topped \$5.5 million last year.

In this environment, it’s as important for Heims and Brown to land good people as it is for them to find new plants. Terra Nova’s growing reputation helps. The company’s plant-breeding expert earned her Ph.D. in India. A sales rep recently left South Carolina mail-order giant Wayside to come

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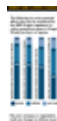


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to Canby.

“There’s been a lot of serendipity to it,” Heims says. “As one person leaves, somebody else appears to fill in.”

Somewhere in the mix of new talent and the verdant, humid rows of green in Canby is the recipe for a new line of plants to rival the Heuchera success.

Driving out from his collector’s garden, past the new plant test plot, Heims spies young salesman Erik Peterson looking out purposefully at a row of exotics. “What are you doing here?” Heims says slyly. “Going to check on something,” replies Peterson. “You can’t be here,” Heims jabs. There’s some more back and forth. It’s a subtle little ritual between new plant seekers, a quick assertion of Heims’ seniority and a glimpse at one of the new sport fishermen, tentatively casting into the ocean of ordinary plants.

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