

Just days after the Lilac Fire near San Diego destroyed much of his growing grounds as well as the homes of his caretakers, Jerry Robinson of Rainforest Flora Nursery arrived at the SCHS December meeting to give his scheduled presentation. Despite the devastating losses he and his partner, Paul Isley, incurred to their business, Robinson gave an interesting and upbeat talk, albeit tinged with irony when he spoke about the impact of the fire on his livelihood of the past 40-plus years, and the postponement of his own retirement plans, originally scheduled for the next year.

By way of introduction, Robinson gave a brief history of Rainforest Flora, formed with his partner Isley in 1976 out of a love for the unusual "air plants" known as tillandsias. The business eventually expanded to almost 300,000 horizontal square feet of growing space, with tillandsias in various stages of growth numbering in the millions. It is this inventory that was most heavily impacted by the fires, especially as tillandsias can



Photo credit: Paul Isley

take decades to grow to maturity. The partners began importing the plants in the 1980s from Guatemala, and Robinson estimated they have since collected over 2,000 species, often from areas where their habitat is threatened by the land being razed to provide grazing grounds for beef cattle.

The number of salvageable plants surviving the fires will only become evident over the course of the next few years as the nursery is rebuilt and new cuttings are propagated from rescued plants.

Robinson shared that the bulk of his sales comes from providing novelty items to retailers such as Home Depot, who purchase home items such as "bird on a ring" and driftwood planters to which tillandsias are attached. The most recent bonanza came in the way of Day of the Dead novelties which yielded sales in excess of 250,000 units to Trader Joe's in the last few years. The wholesale business allows the partners to also grow other exotic plants which are available at their wholesale/retail showroom in Torrance. Robinson generously brought along a large selection of these for the evening's plant raffle, which proved quite popular, including the following featured bromeliads. The neoregelia with its large, colorful leaves; the "flaming torch" billbergia; plus the vriesea and guzmania, grown for their large flower spikes, were all on display.

In addition to donating a beautiful array of plants, as well as providing care and propagation tips, Robinson also stayed to answer questions from the audience. In light of his personal situation, we at the SCHS would like to express our gratitude to Robinson for going above and beyond in honoring his commitment not only to attend this evening, but for providing us with an enjoyable holiday program as well. We wish him all the best in the coming new year.

✿ Sabine Steinmetz

SCHS SUPPORTS WILDFIRE RELIEF

The 2017 wildfires affected many of the SCHS membership personally, either directly or by impacting the lives of people known to them. It has been a devastating time, with many people losing their homes, and in some cases their businesses as well.

Two of the end-of-year fires, the Thomas Fire in Ventura, and the Lilac Fire in San Diego, impacted nurseries with whom the SCHS has enjoyed long-term relationships, and the Board unanimously voted to lend them financial support. The society contributed \$500 apiece to Australian Native Plants and Rainforest Flora, both of which sustained significant damage.

We are happy to report that as of this printing, both donation sites have nearly met their goals. However, we are providing links below for any members who may still wish to help by contributing beyond their "asking" goals.

Thank you!

Australian Native Plants owner Jo O'Connell in Casitas Springs lost her home which was adjacent to the nursery. While much of the nursery was spared, their entire seed bank and reference library, amassed over 25 years, was destroyed.

www.gofundme.com/AustralianNativePlantsFireFund

Rainforest Flora lost two caretakers' homes, impacting three families, plus two greenhouses containing plants which in some cases take decades to mature. Nursery co-owners Jerry Robinson and Paul Isley are planning to rebuild.

www.gofundme.com/lilacnursery

SHARING SECRETS RESPONSES

What So Cal gardens do you enjoy or recommend to visit during the winter?

I was at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden recently and everything was very fresh-looking ... especially the Toyons all covered in their beautiful seasonal berries.

- Carol Aronson

Descanso Gardens, because the Camellia Forest is just beginning to bloom!

- Elysa Rosenfeld-Ortiz

The Huntington always has something blooming - in the winter it's the Camellias and various plants in the Cactus Garden!

- Aprille Curtis

I look forward to the all-too-brief displays from the Saucer Magnolias around town - Descanso has a gorgeous burgundy one right by the pond just past the Center Circle. And the Huntington has some unusual Rhododendrons and Camellias worth checking out too, as well as the many fruit trees in the Chinese Garden which are always spectacular!

- Sabine Steinmetz

Don't miss the fantastic Aloes in your local neighborhoods... and look at the Jade plants covered in flowers at this time of year - not so "ordinary" now are they?

- Anonymous

