

a legacy BY THE SEA

Ron Caird cultivates a 50-year legacy of growth at Por La Mar Nursery.

BY BROOKE BILYJ

When Ronald Caird and his wife, Patricia, started growing flowers in 1972, they didn't realize they were planting the seeds for a company that would one day span three generations. Celebrating 50 years in business this year, Por La Mar Nursery has grown into more than just a thriving wholesale operation — it's a rich family legacy that's cultivating future horticulture leaders to follow in Ron's footsteps.

"To start with, it wasn't thought to be a 50-year company," says Ron's daughter, Erin Caird, who serves as the company's sales and marketing director. "It was grown out of passion."

Ron's passion for plants has since influenced countless other horticulture careers — most notably within his own family. With his son, Brian, now serving as president, daughter Erin overseeing sales and marketing, and three grandchildren currently in the company, Por La Mar is "really embracing the next generations," Erin says.

Here's how Ron is grooming future leaders at

Por La Mar to carry on his tradition of growing.

Rooted in horticulture

The Caird family's roots in Southern California date back more than a century. Ron's father — a Scottish immigrant who spent several years fighting in the trenches during World War I — arrived in Los Angeles in 1919 and began working as an estate gardener. The next year, Pat's family arrived in Santa Barbara, where her father started a landscaping career.

As the first generation born in America, Ron grew up pursuing his parent's values of perseverance and opportunity. "What comes with [being a first generation American] is hard work," he says.

Ron grew up on a Hollywood estate where his father worked as head gardener for 35 years. Surrounded by celebrities, their next-door neighbor was Ricky Nelson, the former child star who appeared with his family in the radio and television series, "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet." From a young age, Ron followed his

POR LA MAR NURSERY

Ron Caird founded Por La Mar Nursery in 1972 with his wife, Patricia.



RON CAIRD



Ron got his first taste of horticulture walking with his father, who worked as head gardener on a Hollywood estate for 35 years.

father around the garden, trimming hedges and tending to plants. “That was where I got my beginnings in horticulture,” he says.

When the owner of the estate died in 1959, the Cairds moved to Santa Barbara. Ron started taking horticulture courses in high school while expanding his experience through a variety of jobs.

“During high school, I worked for my future father-in-law, who had a tree and landscaping business here in Santa Barbara [called Griffin Tree and Landscape],” Ron says. “I also worked for a large orchid grower called Gallop & Stribling. I was their first employee.”

After graduating high school in 1961, Ron enrolled in the ornamental horticulture program at Cal Poly San Luis

Obispo. While getting his education, Ron also found time for his other hobbies, too. “I was a big surfer at the time,” he says. “I spent a lot of time in the water, and went to Hawaii and did some big wave riding for a while.”

Driven by his love of the great outdoors, Ron explored various facets of the horticulture industry after finishing his degree. His first job out of college was working at Mistletoe Sales, a wholesale seed company. “We would travel up and down the state of California collecting tree and shrub seeds, from the Mexican border to Oregon,” he says. “That gave me a real depth of knowledge in plant material.”

Cultivating the American Dream

In the late ‘60s, after a few years in the seed side of the busi-

Ron and Pat bought a 6-acre nursery near Santa Barbara in 1972 as part of his quest “to have a piece of ground.”



ness, Ron returned to his father-in-law’s landscaping company, where he worked for over 20 years. Like his father before him, Ron worked for wealthy clients like Madame Ganna Walska, a Polish opera singer known for the extravagant gardens she designed at her estate called Lotusland, which Ron’s father-in-law had tended since 1948.

“She would run around town buying plant material, and then we would dig them up and plant them back in her estate,” Ron remembers. The first job he did for her was digging up a big *Cycas circinalis* (queen sago palm) to replant at Lotusland. The company also provided tree care, irrigation work, garden clean-ups, “and dealing with the lotus ponds” on the property, he says.

Madame Walska wanted her garden to feature the biggest, best, most unusual specimens — and according to the Lotusland website, she often paid any price to get them. Over the years, Ron helped the “diva” establish what he calls “one of the finest collections of bromeliads in the world.” In the 1970s, Walska famously auctioned off some of her prized jewelry to finance a collection of cycads, which Ron ranks third or fourth in the world thanks to her impressive trio of *Encephalartos woodii*, an incredibly rare specimen that’s extinct in the wild.

The years he spent cultivating gardens stoked Ron’s first-generation quest for The American Dream: which

was, in his words, “to have a piece of ground.” With that ambition, in 1972, Ron and Pat purchased a 6-acre nursery nestled near the coast in Santa Barbara. Under the name Por La Mar Nursery, which is Spanish for “by the sea,” they began growing *Asparagus retrofractus* (Ming asparagus fern) and *Gypsophila* (baby’s breath) to sell at the Los Angeles Flower Market as bouquet foliage.

Still juggling both jobs — landscaping through his father-in-law’s company while launching the nursery — Ron needed help keeping up with the growth. Within a couple of years, he hired a production manager, Dan Jauchen, who still works at the company today. They started building more greenhouses and adding more varieties to Por La Mar’s mix, as the operation steadily grew.

Exploring new varieties

The diversity of Por La Mar’s plant mix expanded through the years as Ron and Pat traveled the globe in search of new varieties. From the tropics all the way to his parents’ respective hometowns in England and Scotland, Ron got to see the world through horticulture.

“My favorite trips [were] always to Denmark or Holland,” Ron says. “We had a lot of Danish and Dutch employees here, especially when we were growing

RON CAIRD

tremendous amounts of bulbs, so that was always good to meet with those [growers].”

After starting out with a focus on foliage, Por La Mar blossomed into flowering potted plant production over the years — growing calla lilies, hydrangeas, zygocactus and roses. “At one time, we were very large rose growers,” Ron says. “We’ve done almost every breed that you can think about, and now we’ve bred our line of roses [for our] Mediterranean climate.”

In 2004, Ron purchased Glad-A-Way-Gardens in Santa Maria. Known for its extensive gladiolus hybridization program, the acquisition added several hundred acres of outdoor glad production to expand the family business.

By taking risks to explore and breed new plant material, Ron guided the company as consumer plant-buying patterns shifted. As recently as 2020, Por La Mar was predominantly growing flowering plants — until Ron saw the market evolving again and jumped back into foliage with a heavy focus on houseplants.

Now, looking back on the market trends Ron has navigated, his second- and third-generation successors still see his risks paying off.

“Part of what makes him a great leader is that he’s bold and he’s a risk taker,” says Aidan Williams, Ron’s grandson, who’s now sales and operations manager at Por La Mar. “He saw how the market and consumer trends were changing, and he took a risk. Two years ago, we were a blooming dominant company, and he flipped the entire business; now we’re [mostly] foliage. It’s led us to have the highest sales we’ve ever had as a company. In an industry that’s ever-changing, one of the greatest lessons I’ve learned from him is: Don’t be afraid to take risks.”

Innovating for growth

Besides plants, Ron also brought back other methods and ideas from the growers he visited around the globe.

For example, when rose production was taking off in Europe in the late 1980s, Ron and Pat traveled to Holland and Denmark several times to explore conveyor systems, potting machines and new lighting technologies to improve their production back home. “That pushed us pretty fast into new technology,” he says.

Finding more efficient ways to grow has been paramount to Ron’s approach — especially in a location like Santa Barbara, where he says, “land values are going about \$150-200,000 an acre,” and “the average home is about \$1.3 million, all the way up to \$30 million.” High costs of



land and labor, combined with the low margins of wholesale greenhouse production, put extra pressure on Ron to use his resources wisely.

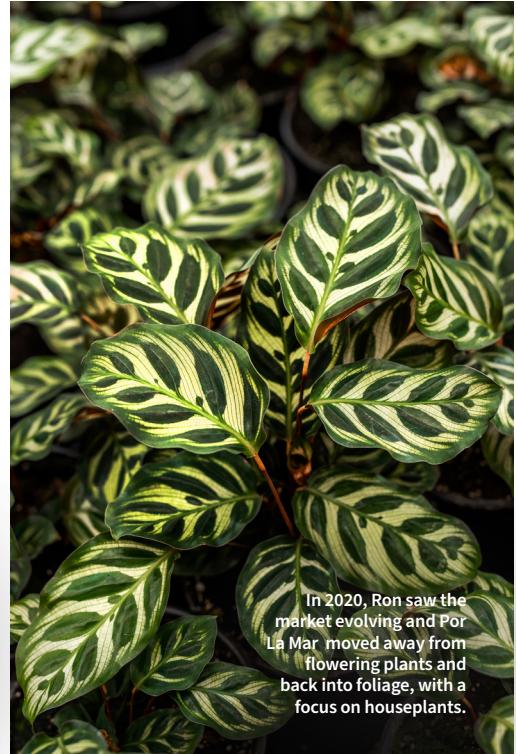
“In a low-margin business, you’ve really got to be watching your numbers and watching your cost analysis,” says Ron, who implemented a Danish cost analysis system many years ago that the company still uses today. “You can’t hope and pray that the price point will take care of it, because it won’t. You’ve got to be innovative. You’ve got to be efficient. And you’d better be looking at your margins very carefully.”

Now, Ron relies on the third generation to bring in new technology to complement his old-school ways. Although the tools may look different today, Aidan says that Ron’s always been “a big proponent of having data drive business decisions.” At the same time, Ron set an example of looking beyond the data to make big decisions by incorporating feedback from the whole team.

“What I’ve always admired is that he has a big picture perspective for the whole company, and he understands how one decision may affect different departments,” Aidan says. “He always views every decision from multiple angles, asking for feedback before moving forward.”



Ron has traveled the world in search of exciting varieties, and uses them to bolster Por La Mar's ever-changing selection of plants.



In 2020, Ron saw the market evolving and Por La Mar moved away from flowering plants and back into foliage, with a focus on houseplants.

Passing on a legacy

As much as Ron loves plants, there's no doubt that the people in this industry mean more to him than the products.

"It's not all about the plants. It's more about, how do we sustain 200-plus lives [by taking care of our employees] and their families? He really takes that to heart," Erin says. "He loves to share what he knows with the next generations."

For example, when Aidan attended Ron's alma mater, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, to follow in his footsteps by studying horticulture, it triggered a special cross-generational mentorship. "I really bonded with him when I went off to college," Aidan says. "He'd come up for coffee, and we'd talk about school, internships and career momentum. That's where our relationship grew to the next level."

After helping at Por La Mar during summer breaks from school, Aidan gained experience working for another grower before joining the family business about a year ago. While rotating through each department to learn the ropes, Aidan says he learned how vital relationships are to his grandpa's legacy as a nurseryman.

"He has incredible relationships with people, whether it's our suppliers, customers [or employees]," Aidan says. "He'll always be remembered for caring for his people. It's the reason why, out of the 250 people we have here, over 100 have been here 20-plus years. That's [a legacy] I want to carry on."

With an average employee tenure of at least 10 years, Por La Mar's strong family culture is a testament to Ron's compassionate approach to leadership. To this day, Ron continues to lead this team by example. Now age 78, Ron still comes into the nursery every day, calling himself the "chief meddler" as he offers ongoing guidance and support for the second and third generations.

Still active on industry and community boards through the local Chamber of Commerce, Lotusland and Cal Poly, Ron says he'll never officially retire. Even though the company is in good hands, he still has an important role to play as his family leads the nursery into a new era.

"After 50 years of doing this, what else can I give them but wisdom?" Ron says.

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.