

Orchids of the future grow in Salinas

NATALIE JACEWICZ 7:07 a.m. PST November 14, 2015



(Photo: Juan Villa/The Salinas Californian)

Some might call orchids low-maintenance: They require water only once every three weeks. But Floricultura Pacific greenhouse in Salinas has elevated orchid care to a Space Age science.

“We probably have more technology in here than in any other U.S. greenhouse,” general manager Don Howell said, gesturing to a maze of conveyor belts and cranes suspended from the ceiling.

Buy Photo



A crane transports orchids at Floricultura Pacific on Wednesday in Salinas. (Photo: Juan Villa/The Salinas Californian)

This center of innovation began in 2006, when the Dutch company Floricultura bought an old complex of greenhouses off Esperanza Road. In greenhouse circles, Holland means innovation, according to Howell.

Dutch conditions require creative approaches, he explained. The Netherlands' high wages make automation an attractive investment, and the cold climate demands temperature-controlled greenhouses.

When the company began the search for an American location, the East Coast initially seemed attractive because, Howell explained, many American buyers live along the Atlantic. But the weather proved too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter, poisonous ingredients for keeping utility bills low.

Salinas offered a much milder climate, but even here, not all sites suited the company's connoisseur tastes. Billowing fog discouraged Floricultura from purchasing a nearby greenhouse — orchids must have their sun.

“This location is very unique,” Howell said. “It's ideal for what we're trying to do.”

Buy Photo



Fatima Acosta and Danelia Montoya pick out an order of orchids at Floricultura Pacific on Wednesday in Salinas. (Photo: Juan Villa/The Salinas Californian)

It's ideal, in other words, for producing 5 million orchids of top quality per year to send to growers across the country, including Puerto Rico and Hawaii. Pioneering technology makes that possible.

Labs in the Netherlands breed orchids through tissue cultures. Scientists shave off a piece of stem from a desired plant and clone it in a petri dish. They then ship samples to the Salinas greenhouse for further growth. For charismatic plants like orchids, cloning offers critical predictability.

"People used to cross two whites and get a pink," said Howell.

Now the greenhouse can develop orchids to maximize the color, flower size, and number buyers want.

Bright red cranes stretch down from the ceilings and move the orchids along metal pathways, to an orchid photo booth that sorts the crops by size. Since orchids take a relatively long time to grow — roughly two years — the plants must be clustered in groups of similar age and size so they can be flagged for sale to growers 12 weeks before they flower. Growers then take the plants and sell them directly to customers.

In a carefully maintained 80°F expanse with insulating blankets hanging overhead, Howell pointed to dozens of rows of potted green leaves. They ranged from short, stubby 6-month-old pots to those over a year old, with banana-sized leaves. No workers lugged the plants around.

[Buy Photo](#)



Floricultura Pacific general manager Don Howell walks through the orchid greenhouse on Wednesday in Salinas. (Photo: Juan Villa/The Salinas Californian)

“We take plants to people, rather than people to plants,” Howell said, looking up at the omnipresent cranes that shoved the pots along the conveyor.

Howell worked for much of his life growing roses until the market crashed. He said that orchids are more resistant to such crashes because of the challenges newcomers face. Growers must be willing and able to invest in greenhouses fitted for orchid needs, while waiting at least two years before they reap their first profits.

This year, white orchids constituted 35-40 percent of the greenhouse’s sales, thanks to the ravenous demands of brides and grooms. Howell says he’s never seen a comparable white orchid mania.

That’s saying something. Howell has been working in greenhouses a long time. But the novelties of Floricultura Pacific offered him fresh entertainment.

“I’ve been working in greenhouses all my life,” said Howell. “To get into something brand new with all the latest technology was pretty exciting.”

Buy Photo



Orchids from Floricultura Pacific on Wednesday in Salinas. (Photo: Juan Villa/The Salinas Californian)

Read or Share this story: <http://bit.ly/1NNWVNz>

COLLECTING BUTTERFLIES IN PANAMA HELPED ALEXANDER FIND HOPE.

A wish can give hope to a child with
a life-threatening medical condition.



DONATE

MAKE-A-WISH.

TOP VIDEOS

MORE STORIES



Education Digest for Nov. 16

[\(/story/news/2015/11/16/education-digest-nov-16/75845424/\)](/story/news/2015/11/16/education-digest-nov-16/75845424/)

[\(/story/news/2015/11/16/education-digest-nov-16/75845424/\)](/story/news/2015/11/16/education-digest-nov-16/75845424/)

Nov. 16, 2015, 9:09 a.m.



Local crops on top of food safety

[\(/story/news/2015/11/16/local-crops-top-food-safety/75838146/\)](/story/news/2015/11/16/local-crops-top-food-safety/75838146/)

[\(/story/news/2015/11/16/local-crops-top-food-safety/75838146/\)](/story/news/2015/11/16/local-crops-top-food-safety/75838146/)

Nov. 16, 2015, 9:09 a.m.

[Salinas drivers ease into](#)



roundabout

(/story/news/2015/11/15/salinas-

drivers-ease-

into-

roundabout/75834418/)

(/story/news/2015/11/15/salinas-drivers-ease-

into-roundabout/75834418/)

Nov. 15, 2015, 7:08 p.m.