



2013 HORT
HERO

EMBRACING CHANGE

CHANGE AND INNOVATION ARE INEVITABLE. BY EMBRACING THEM, THIS YEAR'S HORT HERO — DANNY TAKAO — HAS PROVEN HIS DEDICATION TO HELPING THE INDUSTRY FLOURISH.

By Abby Kleckler

The horticulture industry is undeniably changing as customers age, big box stores compete with independent garden centers (IGCs) and technology continues to evolve. These changes not only lead to challenges for those in the industry but also opportunities.

Danny Takao says his life motto is “in order for things to change, you need to change the way you do things.”

Takao embraces change and not only provides innovation and vision for his company but also for the horticulture industry as a whole. As the owner and president of Takao Nursery and past-president of OFA — The Association of Horticulture Professionals, he is dedicated to helping the industry flourish. For these reasons, Takao is *GPN's* 2013 Hort Hero.

Transitioning the Family History

Takao's passion for plants goes back more than 37 years when he began working in the family nursery and landscaping business. His mother started the nursery in Torrance, Calif., in 1960, so growing up, Takao learned everything he could about producing groundcover plants.

As a child, Takao's parents required him to take judo lessons, which were surprisingly tied to the nursery business.

“In Gardena, Calif., there were a lot of Japanese growers, so judo was like how little league baseball or softball is now,” Takao says. “A lot of the parents were growers and while we were doing judo they would be discussing current issues about the industry. Even our *senseis* [instructors] were nurserymen.”

Although Takao hated judo, he says he knew he wanted to be a part of the horticulture industry.

In 1980, Takao and his wife, Renu, took over Takao Nursery from his parents. The couple moved the nursery to Fresno, Calif. and soon had to make some tough decisions.

“In the groundcover market, it was getting very competitive, so people were just driving the prices down to where it was getting close to



Introducing Danny Takao — *GPN's* 2013 Hort Hero (Photo: Darren McCall)



A more mechanized Takao Nursery in Fresno, Calif., was built around 2000. (Photo: Darren McCall)



Top: Takao's daughter Lisa Takao-McCall handles the nursery's innovative marketing strategies.

Bottom: Takao, his wife Renu, daughter Lisa, son-in-law Darren McCall and son Aaron attend OFA Short Course.



production cost," Takao says. "We made the decision to either transition out of groundcover and move to something else or just look for something else to do for a livelihood."

Takao's passion for plants quickly ruled out the second option. With the help of Pete Kruger from Ball Seed and Don Hanna from Vaughn's Seed, Takao learned of a new opportunity on the West Coast. Takao Nursery switched to perennial propagation in the mid-1990s.

"We just saw the opportunity and we jumped on it," Takao says. "We've always as a company been open to lots of different ideas and lots of different things to propagate."

Takao says he loves bringing plants from other regions of the world into the U.S. market. For example, he has his eye on the ngac plant from Vietnam as just one of many plants worldwide with potential in the United States.

"The plants we create help make this a nicer world," Takao says. "I couldn't imagine having no plants to help beautify our planet."

Takao Nursery, however, looks beyond traditional plants to expand the industry's offerings.

"Our largest single selling plant is not a plant at all but a grass," Takao says. "It's UC Verde Buffalograss, which we're selling as a drought tolerant turf replacement."

The University of California, Davis, developed

UC Verde Buffalograss under the guidance of Dr. Wu. Takao sits on the advisory committee of the Urban Center for California Horticulture (UCCH) along with other industry members.

Adding a New Perspective to OFA

Takao's involvement at UC Davis is just one of his many volunteer activities. Takao served as vice-president of OFA from 2007-2009, then president from 2009-2011 and just ended his term as immediate past-president from 2011-2013.

Takao says the OFA president at the time, Doug Cole of D.S. Cole Growers, and the vice president, Bobby Barnitz of Bob's Market and Greenhouses, convinced him to fill a voided position on OFA's board of directors around 2006.

"It was really good having someone from the West Coast on the board of directors instead of someone from the East or the Midwest," Barnitz says. "He gave us a whole different outlook and viewpoint."

Takao says representing West Coast growers was one of the main reasons he accepted a leadership role with OFA, and his temporary position soon turned into something much larger.

"It didn't take very long to realize, from my perspective, that Danny was someone I identified as a potential vice-president candidate when it was my turn to run for president," Barnitz says. "Danny was very knowledgeable of the industry, and he was

so passionate about OFA.”

Near the end of Barnitz’s presidency, and just before Takao was to take the position, tragedy struck OFA as its CEO, John Holmes, passed away suddenly.

“It was a different and unique time, but Danny gave a very solid leadership foundation for the organization in a somewhat difficult period,” Barnitz says.

Takao made sure that he was present during this transition period.

“Danny was willing to commit the time and the monetary resources to come clear across the country two times a year for meetings besides Short Course,” Barnitz says. “That was really a commitment in my mind that he was willing to do that for the industry, for the organization.”

Reinvigorating the Industry

These trips back and forth to Columbus not only allowed Takao to be present at OFA meetings, but also he says the flights home gave him a lot of time to think.

“What worried me the most were how many growers were going or getting out of business without putting any ripple in the market,” Takao says. “They closed and that was it.”

Takao began thinking about the idea of a

national marketing campaign to bring together growers, retailers and other supplies, similar to that of the “Got Milk?” campaign but for the horticulture industry.

Although the marketing campaign idea got a lot of people talking, there was not much movement on a national level. The idea, however, did spark a lot of state-level marketing campaigns, according to Takao.

As OFA and the American Nursery and Landscape Association (ANLA) form a new trade association, Takao is optimistic about the idea.

“My hope with the new OFA/ANLA is we can come back to the national marketing campaign and see if we can make it happen this time,” he says.

The national marketing campaign would not only appeal to all segments of the industry but also to all generations, a challenge Takao has had to overcome at his own nursery.

“I’ve learned from being in this business a long time that people get set in their ways, and ‘this is how it’s been done’, so they don’t really think about why they do it anymore,” Takao says. “With today’s market and information, that just doesn’t work anymore.”

Takao says he is always open to suggestions from his children or anyone else about how to



Takao says he enjoys teaching his granddaughter, Gwen McCall, the names of the plants.



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attract younger customers.

His daughter, Lisa Takao-McCall, had a bright idea to reinvent the nursery's marketing, so Takao gave her free reign.

Takao Nursery really turned heads with its 2006-

2007 catalog, which presented plants in ways more like a fashion magazine than the traditional catalog. Each year, Takao-McCall continues to push the boundaries with innovative themes to make gardening more approachable to younger generations.

"The reception has been mixed. The older crowd was wondering what the heck we were thinking, with a few exceptions," Takao says. "The younger group liked it."

Loving the Present

Takao constantly looks toward the future to figure out how to change both his business and the industry, but he can also take a step back to look at the things he says he loves most.

"We have great people and lots of family values in this industry," Takao says.

This industry trait is present in Takao Nursery as well. In addition to Lisa, Takao's son, Aaron, attended culinary school but then decided to return to the family business. His middle daughter Emily opted for law, and she is a defense attorney.

"We allowed them to discover what their passions were and tried not to put pressure on them to come back," Takao says.


Takao, however, does hope to keep the nursery business in the family. He speaks fondly of the nurseries in Italy that have kept their businesses in the family for 100 years or more.

"My biggest pride is Lisa's daughters, Gwen and Emma McCall. They represent three generations of growers from the Takao side and four generations from the McCall side," Takao says. "I've been teaching Gwen the names of the plants even though she is only 3 years old, so who knows."

With family and a whole industry by his side, Takao says he looks forward to discovering new plants and being a part of the industry for years to come.

"You find your passion, and I know this is kind of cliché, but I love just getting up, getting back to business and looking forward to running the nursery," Takao says.

Takao embraces the day-to-day activities and sees now as the time to really embrace the changes ahead.

"What we've gone through as an industry was probably one of the worst economies since the Depression, so I'd like to honor this award to the whole industry," Takao says. "The worst is over, so we can move forward and get strong again." 

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