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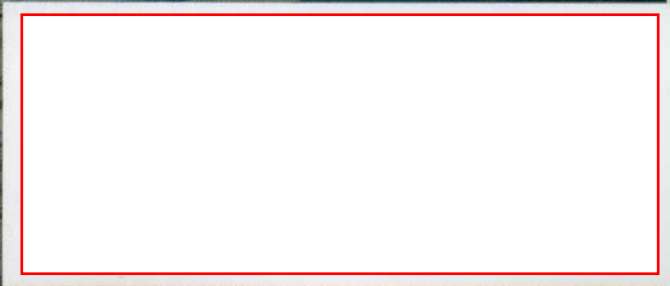
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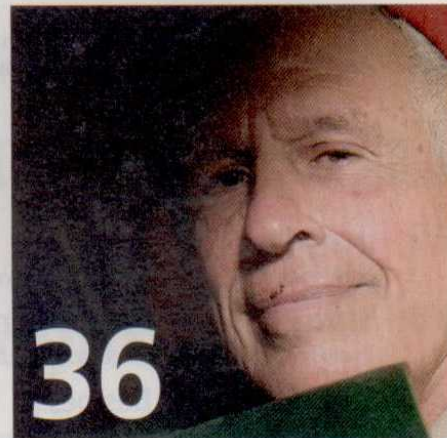
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STANDING IN A SMALL WINDOW-less room, surrounded by thousands of plants sprouting in test tubes and 4-inch plastic containers, Daniel Heims focuses on a quarter-inch sprig. The Brunnera is a showy little ground cover with heart-shaped leaves. But Heims is looking for signs of a distinctive mutation that could make his Canby, Ore. company, Terra Nova Nurseries, a lot of money. The specimen is an ideal variegation, as certain mutations are known in the plant breeding world. "Yeah, baby, yeah," says Heims, Terra Nova's 55-year-old cofounder and president, to Harini Korlipara, a Ph.D. cytogeneticist.

This particular mutation came about by chance and will be propagated through tissue culture, a technique that Heims has practiced for two decades. The plant's growth tip ("Think of it like a human stem cell," he says) is extracted from the bud and placed in agar and a mixture of sugar, hormones and

*Hardy Euphorbia (spurge):
spring-blooming ground cover.*



*Pulmonaria (lungwort):
deer-proof and a favorite
of hummingbirds.*



Veratrum: a green form of the plant that Heims found in



*Lace-leaf maple: decorates
small trees with its
dissected foliage.*

Garden of Earthly Delights

Dan Heims' passion for plants feeds a business—and a great private collection.
By Rebecca Ruiz

fertilizer where it replicates quickly. Variegations double a plant's value, and this Brunnera might go for \$6 instead of \$3. It seems a small sum, but annually the nursery usually sells 5,000 to 35,000 plants per variety. This number has been known to reach 100,000 for the most popular varieties. But first the Brunnera has to survive the testing process.

Each year the nursery starts 75,000 seedlings, winnowed to as few as five plants, which then undergo a rigorous three-year series of stress tests (heat, cold, sun, shade and so forth). A handful of new varieties survives every year, contributing to the business Heims and partner Kenneth Brown started in 1992. Last year it sold \$6.8 million of botanical goods to garden centers and wholesalers that supply chains like Low's. Adding up inventory, real estate, equipment and royalties from

patents, Heims values his firm at \$15 million.

But what really switches on Heims' chloroplasts is breeding and collecting. He is best known for exploiting a mutation in the Heuchera, a plant with rosette-shaped leaves and delicate flowers native to North American gardens. In 1986, while walking through a Portland nursery, he spotted a white-splashed specimen—a 1-in-10,000 mutation—and has since bred 50-plus varieties in numerous shades, including red, orange and yellow.

"He's a great plantsman," says Simon Crawford, a collector who has judged Heims' plants for the Royal Horticultural Society. "It's the depth of his knowledge—he knows how to get great combinations." Flattering, all right, and true to Heims' ambition: "If I can make a plant that's out there forever, that's one way I could reach immortality."

The quest for eternal life started modestly. As a kid, Heims collected exotic fish and comic books, a passion he shared with high school chum Matt Groening (he of *The Simpsons*). While getting a degree in communications (a minor in botany) from the University of Oregon at Eugene, Heims moved into a basement and outfitted it with racks of fluorescent lights to grow rare plants. The hobby became Exotic Plants Unlimited, a company that sold 1,200 different forms of biotica, many grown from clippings he gathered while backpacking in Hawaii. After the business went bust, he started a landscaping outfit.

Heims dates his collecting mania to his affair with the lowly Hosta, a plant with lily-like flowers. Smitten with its tropical foliage, color variations and versatility—it can survive a hard freeze—Heims collected 850 of them.



Heuchera (Stoplight): a drought-resistant ground cover.



Euphorbia (Tasmanian Tiger): a shrubby plant Heims picked up in Australia.



New Zealand Carex (hardy sedge): grassy ground cover that looks dead.



Athyrium (Burgundy Lace): aka. Japanese painted fern, one of Heims' special finds.



Slate-blue hellebore: a winter-blooming hardy perennial.



One rare specimen: Dan Heims.

“Any minute difference and I was all over it,” he says.

In 1992, after selling his landscaping company to his foreman for \$59,000, Heims took his first trip to Japan. It changed his life. After years of correspondence, he met fellow collector Yoshimichi Hirose and the renowned horticulturist Masato Yokoi, whom Heims fondly refers to as his sensei. The trio was driving up Mount Fuji when Heims yelled, “Fui-ri-ba!” (“Variegation!”) After stopping the car he pointed to a *Veratrum japonicum*, a rare poisonous herb with glossy, pleated dark-green leaves and never-seen bold white stripes.

“Their eyes got this look,” Heims recalls. “They [thought] they’d seen every variegated plant in the world.” Grabbing shovel and plastic bag, they forded a stream to dig up the plant.

Heims has traveled much of the globe in search of species he can sell or keep for himself. Hiking the Poás Volcano national park in Costa Rica in 2002, he came across a variegated *Gunnera*, with leaves three feet wide and splashes of white with a red vein—“one of my Holy Grail plants.” Alas, it was too close to a ranger’s station. Heims rushed to get a permit, and when he returned, the plant was gone. This summer he’s on his way to South Africa to find succulents and wildflowers. Once, visiting a private garden in

Australia, Heims found *Oxalis* bulbs from the Tasmanian national collection in a pot. A colorful array of his favorites grow on every square inch in his home garden, a third of an acre in southwest Portland: ferns flush with orange tones from the Chilean Andes; a small grove of Japanese maples; slate-blue hellebores bought for \$25 from a breeder. The most he has personally spent on a plant is \$150 for a Japanese toad lily. Many of his more valuable items—a \$20,000 gold-edged orchid from Japan, for example—he received as gifts or in trades. He gets vegetation through customs via a commercial license to import. It still has to pass USDA inspection.

Little steps on the road to immortality. **F**