

Jim and Electra Elliott

By Sue Hakala

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Jim Elliott and his wife Electra own Arizona Cactus Sales at 1619 South Arizona Avenue in Chandler. The nursery carries cactus and succulent plants for the landscape, and also specimen plants. When asked what Jim likes most about owning a nursery he said, "I like growing and working with the plants, and the fact that I can't get fired."

Jim moved to Tucson as a child with his family in December 1957. "My mom started building a little cactus garden. I used to follow her around while she worked in it, and I guess my interest began there." After four years in the Air Force and a year afterwards as a civilian, Jim married Electra, and they looked for a business to buy. "I didn't want a franchise or anything with alcohol. After visiting a nursery, I thought it was something I could do and would like," Jim said. Electra worked full time, supporting them while the business began growing. They opened Arizona Cactus Sales at 27th Avenue near Camelback. After two and one-half years, Jim opened the Chandler nursery. "I was able to afford the second location as the result of a sale I had to someone in Okinawa for 450 Saguaros," Jim said. He found, though, that his customer service was diluted by having two locations, and decided to close the Phoenix location. "I was determined to have the best cactus nursery in the Valley with the best customer service, having one location has allowed me to realize this goal," Jim explained.

Where does Jim get most of the plants for the nursery: "We grow them ourselves through propagation. We have 3.5 acres behind the nursery and ½ an acre at home. Due to the high standards I have for plant quality, we find it best to primarily rely on ourselves. The small potted plants that we sell come from Dan Bach's nursery in Tucson, and we also do a lot of plant salvaging."

What does Jim sell the most of: "The most popular plants are the Peruvians (columnar cactus), then prickly pear and cholla cactus."

What question does Jim get asked the most: "Hands down, it's how to water."

What is Jim's most challenging plant to grow: "Rainbow cactus can die so easily. I can't figure out what can kill a healthy plant so quickly. Beaver tail cactus are also a problem. In their native habitat they get 5-10 inches of rain in the winter, none the rest of the year. So they can rot real easily here. The public has real trouble with transplanting ocotillos. I buy all of the ones I sell from Texas. We've learned that the best way to start them here is to mist them 1-2 times a day for 1-2 months with no deep watering. Then deep water two times a month in summer, and once a month in the winter. If people would follow this regime they'd have 100% success. The problem is, most get lazy about the misting part. We have found that this is crucial."

What bug does Jim most fear: "After bankruptcy, root mealy bugs as they are so hard to get rid of. I also hate agave weevils."

What soil mix does Jim like best: “I use a commercial cactus mix and add pumice and a slow release fertilizer like Ozmocote. I’ve found that young plants do well in just about any soil mix. Old collected plants don’t like any soil change, and end up dying as a result although it can take years. I’ve been experimenting growing all the plants in the ground with flood irrigation. The plants are loving it.” (Talk to Jim before trying this yourself.)

What is Jim’s personal favorite plant: “I love fishhook barrel cactus because of all the different shapes, sizes, colors, and because they bloom in July through September when it’s really miserable out. I usually feel miserable myself from working out in the heat, and they bring me such joy with their beautiful blooms.”

Who does Jim go to for advice when he gets stumped: I can usually solve my own problems through trial and error, as I’ve learned that there are usually several ways to find an answer. When I’m really stuck I call Gerald Wheeler with United Horticultural Services at the University of Arizona.

What are Jim’s favorite gardening books: *Cacti of the Southwest*, by Hubert Earle for local plants; *Cacti* by Clive Innes and Charles Gloss as the best all around book on cactus; *All About Saguaros* by Carl Hodge; and the Cactus and Succulent Society of America’s journals available through membership.

Jim’s tips for newcomers: “You will be nearly 100% successful if you grow plants native to the Sonoran Desert. Take the time to learn what they are and how to grow them. It will save you a lot of money and frustration. Avoid the Mexican Palo Verde it just doesn’t do well here. Learn about the microclimates in your yard before planting so that you plant the right plant in the right place. Grow plants that you like to look at and are interested in, not what a landscaper tells you you should put in. Don’t over plant; know the mature size of what you are planting.”

Visit Jim’s web site at www.AzCactusSales.com.