

Icons of floriculture

Osteospermum is a true success in the horticultural industry. 25 years ago the plant was mainly a South African wildflower but the bedding plant market discovered the plant and driven by demand a successful breeding process was initiated.

Osteospermum ambassador

When Danish grower, Carl Aksel Kragh Sørensen, first set eyes on osteospermum 25 years ago little did he know that in 2008 he would be looking back on one of the true pioneering success stories in international horticulture. At that time he had been involved in the family nursery, Petersminde, for 25 years and the sole owner for five. "The story of the nursery is the traditional one. We were growing many different cultures but had to adjust to the changing market as well as to the conditions imposed by the economic climate, for example the first oil crisis at the beginning of the 1970s. This led us into the production of poinsettia and *Aster novi-belgii*, however, in the end it turned out that aster was not really our cup of tea; we were looking for an alternative to aster and that's really how it all began," says Sørensen, who registered the well known osteospermum trademark, Cape Daisy®, in 1992.

Cuttings from the park

But let's go back to the beginning. A grower from the Danish island of Bornholm brought back some osteospermum from a trip to Spain.

He started relatively small scale production of the plant and the trade, as well as the consumers, loved it. "It was actually the market that discovered osteospermum and not vice versa," says Sørensen. The interest in the plant meant that the GASAs of that time in Odense as well as in Aarhus were looking for local nurseries able to grow osteospermum. In Odense, Bjarne Larsen who later registered the trademark Sunny® took up the challenge and was followed shortly afterwards by Carl Aksel Kragh Sørensen in Aarhus. "The beginning is a story of its own. I knew where osteospermum was planted by the city gardener and got his permission to take some cuttings from the plants in September. Then along came the first shock and a lot of doubts about the new direction we were taking with osteospermum, it is very hard to root the cuttings at that time of the year. Only 10-20% turned out well, however by the following year things were already looking a lot better as we had learned to choose the right cuttings at the right time," remembers Sørensen.

A turning point

In the beginning Petersminde didn't carry out any real breeding. The mother plants were selected from the sales plants and the technique of keeping the mother stock in good and productive condition was developed, including keeping them at high temperature so that the stay productive year round.

A turning point for the nursery came in 1989 when it suffered from a *Phytophthora* attack shortly before the plants should have been sold. "We lost nearly 80% of that crop and I realized then that either I had to give up osteospermum or really go for it and start breeding from better quality plant material," says Sørensen, who today can be pleased that he settled for the latter strategy.



Goals achieved

A breeding program was set up in 1991 together with the breeder Niels Christensen and the results came so quickly that the trademark Cape Daisy was introduced the following year. The original osteospermum species are lower growing and looser built than the hybrids we know today with their flowers carried on quite long stems. "The



The purple Cape Daisy Maseru is one of three new introductions 2007/2008.

by Lotte Bjarke



Carl Aksel Kragh Sørensen inspecting the summer trials at Danish nursery Donbaek, a nursery specializing in osteospermum production.

first goal of the breeding program was to create a healthy root system. This was quickly established but we soon discovered that the healthy roots resulted in plants that were much too vigorous and tall. So the next goal was to get more compact plants that would flower all summer,” explains Sørensen. The rest of the story is well known. Today the Cape Daisy program



The pink-white bicolor of Cape Daisy Volta.

offers a wide variety of compact, healthy plants with flowers in almost any colour you could wish for. Each year new and even better varieties are introduced as the breeding program continues to grow from strength to strength, even though Sørensen has sold his life’s work to Sakata.

Worldwide success

For many years Cape Daisy and Sunny managed to keep osteospermum breeding as a Danish speciality. Now those days are over, but before their dominance in the market was lost the Danish breeders also managed to conquer the American market through cooperation with Paul Ecke Ranch and the Poinsettia License Association (PLA). “In the beginning we managed to keep the production of mother plants in Denmark but sooner or later it had to be spread. You cannot keep a success to yourself and we might have made a mistake in trying to restrict the access to our varieties. Other breeders rose to the challenge and gave it a try as the demand for osteospermum was going only one way,” says Sørensen. Sørensen remains quite impressed and pleased when he reflects on what the horticultural industry has accomplished since he first collected cuttings in the parks of Aarhus. >>

Still going strong

Sakata was one of the players to be involved early on in the osteospermum breeding scene and was also involved in the Paul Ecke project of introducing osteospermum to the American market. So it was a natural progression when first Ecke Europe and then Sakata Europe (when that company was established) bought Cape Daisy five years ago. The contract made Sørensen a consultant and adviser for five years – in order to pass on his know-how for growing, breeding and marketing osteospermum to the new owners. Niels Christensen, now as an employee of Sakata, remains in charge of the breeding program; the company breeding facilities, Danefeld, are located in Marslev, Denmark. Sørensen finishes stating, “My job during the last five years has been to help new growers of osteospermum to get started; a job which has taken me around the world. It is an interesting and exciting challenge that teaches you how important it is to understand that the grower should always adapt his technique to the plant he wants to grow. Not vice versa! It is amazing that one plant can take you so far.” Sørensen will remain working in the future as an independent consultant for Sakata, PLA and others. p III