



Indoor gardening finds new fans

Exotic Plants sees growing interest in unusual houseplants

by Debbie Arrington

Call it the “Plantdemic.” Spending more time at home prompted new interest in gardening and plant shopping, particularly houseplants.

During the pandemic, Exotic Plants – Sacramento’s go-to indoor gardening store – saw a huge increase in interest in houseplants and succulents as more people discovered the pleasure of indoor gardening.

“The Plantdemic was very interesting,” said owner Kifumi Keppler. “It was a learning experience for me, too.”

Why the renewed interest in indoor gardening? Indoor plants have a proven positive impact on mental, physical and

emotional health – all important benefits during such stressful times as a pandemic.

Many of these newbie Plantdemic gardeners had little or no prior experience, but they had definite ideas about what they wanted. Spurred by Instagram and other social media, these shoppers sought out unusual flora, Keppler noted.

“They didn’t want generic plants like Chinese evergreen; they wanted something rare,” she said. “I had to switch gears.”

Keppler and her expert staff tapped their far-flung sources, including those in Hawaii, Tennessee, Italy, Indonesia and right here in Northern California. They filled Exotic Plants’ spacious store with thousands of living treasures.

“That interest is continuing,” she said. “We’re getting more and more rare plants to meet that demand. ... Young people in particular are into new things and unusual plants.”

Why stop with indoor greenery? “We’re starting to offer more outdoor plants such as bamboo, maples and some other unique plants,” Keppler said. “People ask for outdoor plants. People want unusual edible plants, too, used in Japanese and Thai foods such as wasabi, Meyer lemon and kaffir lime.”

Houseplants can create a lush, tropical feel in any room, noted Keppler. “With plants, you’re extending that tropical ambiance from indoors to outdoors.”



Owner Kifumi Keppler has created a go-to destination for plant lovers at Exotic Plants in Sacramento.

PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES



Founded in 1972, Exotic Plants has grown into a regional destination nursery for rare and sought-after plants, attracting shoppers from throughout California and Nevada. It also provides several plant-related services including commercial, residential and special event plant rentals.

Recognized as Northern California's top houseplant expert, Keppler has seen many trends over her decades of experience.

"I went through a lot of changes in the plant industry," she said. "(When she started), it used to be wandering Jew, piggyback plant and Swedish ivy, lots of Boston ferns. I did a lot of designer homes with three to five plants in each room. Designers used houseplants in model homes because they helped sell the property faster."

Now, Keppler adds house appeal in a different way. Her handcrafted moss "walls" are living art – with ferns and other plants incorporated into the richly textured background. Interior designers rely on Exotic Plants to give rooms that something extra – life!

"A lot of people started after me in the plant business; it's become more and more competitive," she added. "But we were strong, and still are."

In 2019, Exotic Plants moved into its current location on Fulton Avenue. Its 4,000-square-foot building brims with colorful bromeliads, vibrant crotons and statuesque palms. Its selection of exotic orchids is the largest in the greater Sacramento region. Many more plants including scores of succulents fill a 3,000-square-foot-patio. There's also space to teach workshops and hold special events.

All plants are very healthy, fresh and ethically sourced, with new stock hand picked by Exotic Plants expert staff.

But its store is much more than a place to buy plants. With its art- and antique-filled spaces, Exotic Plants is – as one shopper said – like "an oasis where customers come to escape the frantic pace of their busy lives and come away feeling refreshed."

Keppler continues to innovate as she nurtures her store and educates its customers. Exotic Plants recently resumed in-person workshops and other events. (See Exotic Plants' website for details.)

After nearly half a century, Exotic Plants is firmly rooted, Keppler said. "Sacramento is becoming a plant town."

"Young people in particular are into new things and unusual plants."

Kifumi Keppler
Owner, Exotic Plants



**Exotic Plants is located at 1525 Fulton Ave., Sacramento.
Phone 916-922-4769 or visit www.exoticplantsltd.com.**



Adding Instant *Impact*

Exotic Plants creates beautiful settings with rental plants

by Debbie Arrington

Whether turning a railyard into a tropical paradise or making rock royalty feel comfortable back stage, Exotic Plants owner Kifumi Keppler knows the power of plants to set the right mood.

"It's instant beauty," she says. "They make a real impact."

With a busy rental service, Exotic Plants – Sacramento's destination indoor garden store – has supplied live plants and expertise for hundreds of local events. From weddings to outdoor concerts, Keppler's plants provide the perfect ambiance.

"An event in a tent, it's just a tent – it's blah," she says.

The same goes for hotel ballrooms or entertainment venues, Keppler adds. "An empty room can use some life. A few little flowers don't have the impact. You add plants, you get instant impact."

Among her 2021 projects, the Lost in Riddim music festival. Held in October in Sacramento's Railyard District, the festival featured popular African and Caribbean artists and attracted thousands of concertgoers. For the artist lounge, Keppler and her crew created lush tropical settings with an assortment of large palms, bromeliads and other potted plants. She also constructed a huge living mural out of moss.

"We made an island effect," says Keppler. "We use some pretty big plants, some of our trees are 15 feet tall. Our biggest go clear to the ceiling. Generally, our large plants that we use are 7 to 8 feet tall. They make a big impression."

A recent Sacramento fashion show framed its runway models with Exotic Plants greenery. Decorating the stage while complementing the clothes, the plants transformed a plain auditorium into a special place.

"Some people want tropical, others want something more refined," she explains. "For a tropical look, we use lots of palms and leafy plants. For a more refined look, we use more ferns and ficus trees and put everything in white pots."



For a recent fashion show, Exotic Plants added beauty and life to a plain auditorium.

PHOTOS BY ANNE STOKES





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Kifumi Keppler
Owner, Exotic Plants

Keppler's portable plant displays are almost ubiquitous at major Sacramento events at Golden One Center and other venues. Thousands of local college graduates have walked past Exotic Plants greenery and flowers, used to decorate arena and auditoriums for graduation ceremonies for UC Davis and Sacramento State. Red Hawk Casino commissioned custom leis and centerpieces.

One of her most memorable special assignments Creating an indoor jungle back stage for Sir Elton John.

"Elton loves plants, he's crazy about them," Keppler recalls of his Sacramento concert appearance. "We brought tons – lots of palms, trees, shrubs and orchids, too. We lined them up in the hallway and filled the green room."

From beautiful orchids to majestic palms, plants can elevate events to special occasions, says Keppler. Renting live plants is often cheaper than buying fresh cut flowers. Weddings, anniversaries and other occasions may use blooming orchids or potted succulents as contemporary table centerpieces.

"You can rent large orchids for \$15 to \$20, depending on variety, while small flower arrangements cost \$50, \$60," she explains. "Multi-spiked orchids grouped in big containers (can be rented for) \$100 to \$200. A floral arrangement, to have the same punch, would cost \$700 to \$800."

During the holiday season, Exotic Plants rents plants for parties and celebrations of all kinds. (Call for availability.) On request, Keppler makes custom flower arrangements, she is a longtime Ikebana expert.

Exotic Plants also hosts private events at its Fulton Avenue's plant-packed store.

"We hosted an engagement party," Keppler says. "The greenery was already here and it's a wonderful space. We made succulent corsages and bouquets. It was a lot of fun."

Exotic Plants is located at 1525 Fulton Ave., Sacramento. Phone 916-922-4769 or visit www.exoticplantsltd.com.





This hobby really *grows on you*

Catering to collectors, Exotic Plants specializes in rare and unusual plants

By Debbie Arrington

Some houseplants are worth more than their weight in gold. And there are plant lovers eager to buy them.

Plant collecting has become a hot hobby, particularly for millennials and Gen Z indoor gardeners who are packing their homes with often-expensive rare plants.

"The most expensive collector plant right now is *Philodendron spiritus sancti*," said Exotic Plants store manager Maxon Fackert, who is also a collector. "I actually had one, but I sold it three years ago for \$1,200. They now sell for \$25,000 – if you can find one."

Rarity plays a big part in high plant prices, but so does desire. "What makes a plant expensive? It's all supply and demand," Fackert said. "(The most expensive plants) tend to be slow growing and hard to find. But there's always something new out there that people want."

Exotic Plants, Sacramento's go-to indoor gardening store, has become a trusted source for these collectors.

"We try to get plants no one else has in the area," owner Kifumi Keppler said. "What is an 'Exotic Plant' if not unusual or rare?"

Fackert, 20, is passionate about plant collecting, a hobby he started before kindergarten.

"For my fifth birthday, I asked for a cactus," he recalled. "It's now 16 feet tall."

Starting with cacti and colorful bromeliads, Fackert gradually expanded his collection.

"By age 11 or 12, I really got into carnivorous plants," he recalled. "For my 14th birthday, I asked for a greenhouse."

Now, Fackert tends two greenhouses packed with more than 800 rare plants. "It's become a full-on obsession," he said with a smile.

As Exotic Plants store manager, Fackert shares his plant expertise while also propagating rarities. His propagation skills as well as connections in the collector community have been invaluable.

"Maxon can grow anything," said Keppler.

Aroids are especially popular right now, Fackert said.

Also known as the arum family, aroids include such familiar houseplants as philodendron, monstera, anthurium, spathiphyllum (peace lily), pothos and *Zamioculcas zamiifolia* (ZZ plant).

But it's the aroids with unusual attributes that elevate them to collector status. For example, 'Red Secret' *Alocasia cuprea* shimmers like copper; its waxy leaves look metallic. That pricey *Philodendron spiritus sancti* features extra long, skinny leaves. With shiny gem-toned foliage, Jewel alocasias are a favorite with collectors. So are variegated anthuriums. One of Fackert's favorites is *Anthurium clarinervium*, also known as the Velvet Cardboard Heart Plant.



Exotic Plants store manager Maxon Fackert shows off a Velvet Cardboard Heart Plant.

PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES





New hybrids help drive interest and demand, he noted. “Hoyas – it’s impossible to keep up with them, there are so many new varieties. There are 148 different cultivars of *Hoya carnosa* alone.”

Nicknamed porcelainflower or wax plant, *Hoya carnosa* is beloved for its sweet-scented flowers as well as its attractive foliage.

Exotic Plants is known for its orchids, always among the most collectible plants. Besides *Phalaenopsis* in a rainbow of colors and combinations, the store stocks a huge selection of unusual *Dendrobiums*, slipper orchids, pansy-faced *Miltonia* and more.

“My favorite orchid is *Bulbophyllum phalaenopsis*,” said Fackert. “It has 5- to 7-foot long leaves and smells like death.” (A collector’s prize demanding humid greenhouse conditions, this orchid has hairy red and yellow flowers with the scent of rotten meat.)

His other favorites include *Heliconia rostrata* (hanging lobster claw plant) with “crazy blooms” and *Impatiens morsei* (Velvet Love impatiens) that has velvety foliage and orchid-like flowers.

Dylan Chand, who joined Exotic Plants’ staff in 2021, is another young collector.

“I became a plant collector by watching YouTube videos,” said Chand, a conservation/ecology major at Arizona State University. “People here have so much knowledge to share.”

For beginning collectors, Fackert recommends succulents—they’re easy to grow and easy to share, a big part of building a collection.

“Hoyas are a perfect transition to houseplants, but they need good light,” he added.

Snake plant (*Sansevieria*) is nearly indestructible, making it another good candidate for beginning collectors. With its distinctive foliage, monstera (also known as Swiss cheese plant) is a good introduction to the aroid family.

Ready to start a collection? Or add more plants to your indoor garden? Exotic Plants staff is ready to help.

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Phone 916-922-4769 or visit www.exoticplantsltd.com.





Vivariums add *animals to jungles* under glass

Create a perfect habitat for reptiles, frogs and plants; Exotic Plants hosts two events

By Debbie Arrington



Exotic Plants shop manager Maxon Fackert adds plants to a vivarium.

PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES

Consider this an indoor jungle that's more than a home for plants. Critters like it, too.

Vivariums take terrarium gardening to the next level. They simulate the habitat of reptiles or other animals, usually encased by glass, Plexiglas or clear acrylic. It's sort of like an aquarium for snakes, lizards, turtles, toads or frogs, surrounded by plants instead of water.


"Snakes are meat eaters, not plant eaters; they're not going to nibble (on the plants)," explains Exotic Plants store manager Maxon Fackert, who has his own vivarium. "So your plant choice is a lot wider."

Exotic Plants will host two vivarium events: A free vivarium basics class March 11 and a build-your-own vivarium workshop March 26. The store also sells ready-made vivariums packed with plants (no animals included). (For details, cost or reservations, contact the store at 916-922-4769.)

"At our free class, you'll learn how to make your own vivarium – soil, plants, etc.," says Fackert, who will teach both events. "It will be good for any reptile or just as a terrarium. The build-your-own workshop will include the tank, soil and plants; you'll actually make one."

Vivariums are particularly popular with reptile owners. A moisture-loving pet snake may be happier in its own tropical habitat. A vivarium is certainly more fun to look at than a plain tank or enclosure.

A large vivarium greets visitors to Exotic Plants' store on Fulton Avenue in Sacramento. Filled with lush greenery, the store's vivarium is home to a large albino boa who is easy to spot in his private jungle.





At home, Fackert keeps frogs in his vivarium. A heat mat under the tank keeps the atmosphere inside the vivarium warm and jungle-like for the little amphibians; frogs must have high humidity to keep their skin moist.

Putting together a vivarium is similar to creating a terrarium. What's the difference? Terrariums are designed to raise plants; vivariums focus on the animals and their habitat.

Like a terrarium, a vivarium has its own (almost) enclosed ecosystem with just about everything inside to support its animal and plant life (except the animal's food source).

The layers at the base of the vivarium act as water filters as the plants inside this mini-environment filter the air.

Fackert suggests starting with a 10-gallon tank such as a typical aquarium. The bottom and sides must be watertight.

At the bottom, he puts down a layer of LECA, lightweight expanded clay aggregate. LECA is made up of little baked clay balls that expand when wet. As a bottom layer, it creates ideal drainage for both vivariums and terrariums.

Over that LECA base, Fackerts adds a layer of pumice. This volcanic rock absorbs excess water, so plant roots don't rot. It also improves aeration.

Next comes a layer of sphagnum moss, which filters water while also retaining moisture; great for plants as well as animals inside the vivarium. Reptiles in particular love sphagnum moss; it make a soft place to burrow or hide, and helps them shed their skin.

Finally, Fackert tops the moss with a layer of terrarium soil mix: Coir, orchid bark and peat moss. This mix also retains moisture and encourages the vivarium's plants to put down strong roots.

As for what to plant, it depends on who is going to live inside the vivarium.

"We stock a lot of great companion plants for reptiles and vivariums," Fackert notes.

Those include a wide range of Aroids such as Pothos, Philodendrons, Alocasias and Anthuriums. Also handsome in a vivarium are prayer plant (Maranta leuconeura) or colorful rex begonias. Plants generally are grouped by light and water needs as well as size; they need to stay compact to fit into their little world.

Rocks, wood or other accents can be added to

create extra interest. A lid maintains moisture – and keeps the animal life inside.

The result is an ultra easy-care habitat for both plants and pets. The plants, at least, almost take care of themselves.

"You only need to add water once a month," says Fackert. "It's really self-sustaining."

"At our free class, you'll learn how to make your own vivarium – soil, plants, etc."

Kifumi Keppler
Owner, Exotic Plants

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'Moss art' adds life to dark rooms with zero maintenance

Exotic Plants' Kifumi Keppler and staff create one-of-a-kind pieces with natural materials

By Debbie Arrington

With the creative skills of Kifumi Keppler and her staff, moss becomes art. Using this plant material, she creates three-dimensional green scenery that can cover an entire wall.

"We've had so many requests for moss walls; they're just flying out the door," says Keppler, founder and owner of Exotic Plants in Sacramento. "We're getting inundated with orders, from Las Vegas to Los Angeles. It's kind of exciting."

Known for its wide selection of indoor and tropical plants, Exotic Plants has earned new customers throughout California and Nevada for its handcrafted moss walls and other moss art pieces. The garden store on Fulton Avenue features a large gallery devoted to moss art including a spectacular waterfall scene studded with blue stones.

To most people, moss doesn't inspire art. It grows on the north side of trees and walls; that's about all they know.

But moss comes in many forms, varieties and colors, including a full spectrum of green hues and earthy tones. Keppler appreciates the textures that moss gives when combined with other natural materials such as dried limbs, twigs or stones.

"It gives life to a room," she says, "like living art."

That "living art" doesn't need watering; although they keep their green

color, the mosses are actually preserved and not alive.

Because the moss is not growing, it needs no light either. That makes moss art ideal for dark corridors or rooms. Without the demands of indoor plants, moss brings the vibrant feel of greenery and plant life to windowless spaces – with little if any care.

"A moss wall is the perfect substitute for a 'living wall,'" says Keppler, referring to vertical installation of indoor plants, "but without all the trouble and complications."

Exotic Plants' moss art can be seen in several Sacramento-area businesses.

Recently, Exotic Plants installed large moss walls in hallways at the headquarters of a local construction company. A row of meditative moss scenes fill the space above work stations in an otherwise cold computer room in a Roseville real estate office.

"I did 36 for one company," Keppler says. "There's so much life incorporated into a moss wall."

Moss art is part collage, part mosaic. The layers of material give the final piece depth and a three-dimensional feel. The individual materials fit together snugly like a puzzle.

Often, Keppler depicts scenery in her





moss art; the moss becomes a meadow or forest foliage. Sometimes, the moss whimsically depicts other moss – on a stylized tree or rock made of different-hued mosses, bark and lichen.

More abstract designs follow the graceful arc of driftwood or other focal point.

“I like a cascading branch,” Keppler explains. “Think of the way they look in the wild, then follow that line with texture.”

Keppler has experimented incorporating living plants – such as air plants, ferns and succulents – as part of moss walls. But those additions have light and water needs that can make them incompatible with the moss base; they may drip when watered and degrade the moss. Instead, she usually

uses high-grade imitations or silk petals for those leafy or flower-like accents.

Overall, moss art and moss walls capture the same serenity that moss evokes in nature.

“They have the same appeal as a living plant,” Keppler says, “but with zero maintenance. And they survive in zero light; too much light can actually bleach them out.”

In addition to its moss gallery, Exotic Plants makes moss walls and art pieces to order. Pricing depends on the size and complexity of the creation.

On May 28, learn how to make your own moss art during a special evening workshop at Exotic Plants. The class includes instruction plus all materials to make a framed

moss art piece. Tickets start at \$80 for a 12- by 12-inch moss art piece and range up to \$150 for a 14- by 20-inch moss mini-wall. Call the store for reservations or more information.

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