

## Croquet at Christmas

Gardener profile: James

Born in Oklahoma, he escaped long before the Dust Bowl and headed off to go to Harvard. Actually, he was on the train to the University of Chicago, but “met some chaps on the train who were going to Harvard. And they said, why don’t you come along with us instead?” So, he did. In those days you could just walk in and register.

He always had lots of stories like this, told with great timing and a dry smile and low chuckle that came just at the end.

After college and the first World War, and married now, he embarked on a career in mining geology. First he worked in silver and copper mines high in the mountains of Peru in the early 1920’s. Then he got a job as chief geologist at the famous Homestake Gold mine in the Black Hills of South Dakota, which for many years was the most productive gold mine in the world. The 1930’s in Lead, S.D., were prosperous, unlike the rest of the country, but it was a remote place to raise a family. It’s definitely a great place to be a geologist.

His boys weren’t very interested in rocks and wildlife, but the daughter was. She accompanied him on geology field trips all over Wyoming and South Dakota. She had a special interest in biology, so he built her a little “laboratory” (really just a shed) of her own at the cabin the family built in Spearfish Canyon. He fished every day he could and caught his limit of trout (12) nearly every time. Tied his own flies, of course. He sketched and learned the wildflowers and appreciated the fresh produce you could buy locally during the summer. “When you buy corn, start the water boiling as soon as you get home. The fresher it is when you cook it, the sweeter.”

After the war, he moved to Pasadena to teach mining geology at CalTech. Though he was teaching science, he was an engineer by training. And engineers are very, very methodical about the things that they do. Which served him very well in the next subject that captured his interest.

People like to make fun of the Los Angeles area. It’s the poster child, to many, of everything that is wrong in urban and transportation planning.

But what most people don’t know is what a beautiful place the L.A basin was in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, what a diverse range of climates it has, and what a truly wonderful place it has always been to garden. With just enough winter chilling, some frost and an occasional dusting of snow, just enough summer heat, and relentless sunshine, it must have seemed like paradise.

Living less than a mile from Huntington Gardens, he saw all of what a serious gardener could grow in that mild climate. And he embraced that with all the gusto of a man entering the second half of his life looking for a new passion.

Camellias. Roses. Cactus, succulents. Aloes. Orchids.

Bromeliads attached to a great trunk of a cork oak he’d acquired somewhere. A glass house for cactus off the breakfast room. A semi-automated greenhouse for orchids of all kinds, strategically located where it was shaded in the afternoon.

By the time I met him as a gardener, he had several dozen roses and camellias. He had bought a little cottage in Palm Springs and planted a cactus garden there. He exulted, as much as a man characterized by great reserve and dry wit could exult, in the latest rose, the new orchid hybrid. There were always orchids in bloom. If you admired one, there was a division potted up and waiting for you at the next visit.

And each division came with its own little 4 x 6 card, showing the provenance and the full botanical name, and the dates of division, transplant, and bloom. Final entry: "given to Don." Like an epitaph, I thought.

"Learn to write things down when you're young," he would say, "so when you get old, you're in the habit."

I can still see his whole garden, in my mind's eye. As many times as I walked it with him, I could probably draw a map of it today from memory. Every tree had a story, and apparently I was the only one interested enough to hear them all.

His yard and gardens were perfectly orderly. The thing that really strikes me in hindsight is how well balanced it all was, and how artfully designed considering he had no training in that regard. The view from the patio was of a goldfish pond gracefully shaded by a Drake elm. A casual walk along the lawn took you to groups of roses in the sunny spots, or camellias in filtered shade, all set in between groups of big tobiras casting their lemony scent in spring. Two enormous sycamores towered over the west side of the two-story stucco house that had the obligatory Pasadena red tile roof.

The vast dichondra lawn was his pride and yet the bane of his existence. He mowed it to  $\frac{1}{2}$ " so the family could play croquet on it at Christmas-time, and he fought endless battles to keep it perfect. Together we became experts on flea beetles and die-out, and never resolved his oxalis issue.

This man never swore, except when he saw that the raccoons had trashed his fishpond again. The Drake elm over the pond? A beautiful mistake due to the constant litter to be netted out. He could bring in a bouquet of roses for his wife whenever she wanted one. Camellias thrive in Pasadena. He didn't care about herbaceous perennials. He was more likely to group some echeverias or aloes to separate the beds of flowering shrubs.

Despite the climate and many possibilities, he didn't really grow food plants. Well, except for a Mexicola avocado and a kumquat, and the Seville orange that he planted along the sidewalk. Partly that one was a practical joke on passersby who might snatch the sour, bitter fruit. But he loved marmalade and ate it every day. So, of course he grew his own Seville oranges, since that is what real marmalade is made from.

What he really liked, and wanted to grow to perfection, were the showy flowers. His night-blooming cereus covered the west-facing wall of both stories. He dragged his grandson out of bed in the middle of the night to show him the blooms. His goal was the perfect long-stemmed rose, and I hesitate to list the products he used to achieve that. Those were different times; when DDT was banned, he drove to every garden center in the area to stock up for his orchid pests. He loved unblemished camellias floating in a bowl, huge gaudy blooms of cactus, and especially the fussy paphiopedilum orchids.

He was very loyal to brands: always drove a Chrysler, ate Kellogg's Corn Flakes, and bought Scotts products for his lawn. He was very loyal to the garden center that gave him great service. Their prices were fair because they were good and reliable. Boy, was that a useful lesson for me to learn.

What amazes me to this day is how respectful he was of my knowledge, considering we were about six decades apart in age and he had far more experience than I did. He was nearing the end of his gardening years as I was embarking on my nursery career. But he treated me like an expert. Was there something new that would work better on his roses? And what about the damn dichondra? Oops, sorry, didn't mean to swear.

Finally, his wife gone and children moved away, it was time for this chapter of his life to end. He sold the house, moved back to the Black Hills to fish for trout for as many of his remaining days as he could. We were sad to see him move away from this home and garden, but I knew it was what he wanted to do. He couldn't care for the garden to his level of perfection, and it was time for someone else to enjoy it. It seems I was about the only person who understood that.

"You could hire someone. Your gardener does a good job."

No, that's not the point. It's not having the garden that matters, it's making it and keeping it going. Doing it right.

When I was first learning to garden, and when I first went into the nursery business, I learned a lot from amazing old gardeners like James. Some taught me to appreciate plants, that it was ok to be fascinated by certain kinds of flowers. Some, the scientists I grew up with, taught me **why** we did certain things. That's how scientists are.

But engineers? They know **how** to do things, the one most effective and efficient way to get the job done. That's what engineers are like.

You can grow anything if you just know **how**. Measure, follow a schedule, do it this way, keep records. Write it down. Obsess a little. It's ok.

Christmas Day has two distinct plant-related memories for me: a Dancy tangerine in the toe of the stocking each year, and playing croquet on a perfectly manicured dichondra lawn.

And I'll never forget those cactus blooms at midnight.



[http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE\\_Christmas%20croquet/Paphiopedilum.jpg](http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Christmas%20croquet/Paphiopedilum.jpg)

Paphiopedilum, sometimes called slipper orchid. Photo is digitized from a slide I took in the 1970's of my plant. Paph's are pretty exacting as to soil, temperature, and light requirements. Fortunately, my division came with detailed care instructions.



[http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE\\_Christmas%20croquet/Camellia%20alba%20plena.jpg](http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Christmas%20croquet/Camellia%20alba%20plena.jpg)

Alba Plena is a Japanese camellia that was introduced to England from China in the 1790's. With perfect overlapping petals, this flower form is called Classic Formal. Highly recommended to this novice gardener in the 1970's, it was the first camellia variety I planted. Camellias benefit from addition of sulfur to the soil to adjust the pH, and organic material on the surface to retain moisture and improve soil structure.



[http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE\\_Christmas%20croquet/Cactus%20flower.jpg](http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Christmas%20croquet/Cactus%20flower.jpg)

Some species of cactus bloom only at night, an adaptation to pollination by night-flying moths and bats. "Night-blooming cereus" is actually a common name for several species of cactus, including the epiphyllum shown here. Epiphyllums are also known as orchid cactus and have huge showy flowers. Easy to grow, but a little frost tender in our area.



[http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE\\_Christmas%20croquet/Rose%20Chrysler%20Imperial.jpg](http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Christmas%20croquet/Rose%20Chrysler%20Imperial.jpg)  
Chrysler Imperial is an exceptionally fragrant red rose. Introduced in 1952 by Descanso Gardens in Southern California, it quickly became popular and was awarded the American Rose Society Selection in 1953. Yes, it was named after the car. For fragrance and heat tolerance, it is still one of my favorite varieties for this area.