



By Lori L. Cain for USA TODAY

Deep-rooted attachment: Dan Heims, horticulturist and owner of Terra Nova Nurseries in Canby, Ore., embraces a 'Curly Fire Flush' begonia.

Meet a perennial winner



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How does his garden grow? Dan Heims shows how plants are started at his nursery in Canby, Ore., about 25 miles south of Portland.

Colorful Dan Heims is the man behind a burgeoning passion

By Craig Wilson
USA TODAY

CANBY, Ore. — Dan Heims is a big guy. In more ways than one.

A bear of a man who lumbers around the vast greenhouses here in jeans and clogs, he's also big in his field. Perennials.

"Dan is bigger than life," says garden writer and old friend Jeff Lowenfels. "You don't miss Dan. There's a fifth dimension to him."

Heims can, in fact, play two recorders, at the same time, through his nostrils. But first things first.

If you've ever wandered your local garden center and admired the black leaves of a *ligularia* or a screaming yellow and red *heucherella*, chances are good it's Heims' handiwork. His breeding programs are known worldwide and run the gamut from A to V. That would be *athyrium* to *verbascum*.

Heims playfully pinches Mother Nature's behind, nudging her along. He makes the merely beautiful spectacular, the short taller, the weak stronger. And when he's done,

his creations become the must-haves of the new gardening season.

"It's a little God-like sometimes," he whispers in a visitor's ear.

Heims, 52, is president of Terra Nova Nurseries, a wholesale outfit known for its perennials, located in the Willamette River Valley south of Portland. He and his staff of 56 have 1.3 million plantlets in their lab, all waiting to be bred into more beautiful babes. Think Pygmalion with leaves.

"We do things that would only happen in nature," he says, "but we control the circumstances so it *can* happen."

The horticulturist and his longtime business partner, Ken Brown, bicker like an old married couple, but even Brown concedes Heims is the force of nature behind the operation. "A dreamer," he says.

Although Heims has won dozens of gold and silver medals, including the prestigious Reginald Cory Memorial Cup from the Royal Horticultural Society for his highly



Terra Nova Nurseries

'Fragrant Angel':
An echinacea plant.

► It takes a village to develop a flower, 3D
► A walk in the garden with Dan Heims, 5D

Please see COVER STORY, 3D ►

Bright foliage has changed garden design

Continued from 1D

vanced *heucheria*, he's equally proud of his "plant porno," something he promises to show us later. But first he has his book to plug. *Heucheras and Heucherellas* (Timber Press, \$27.95), which he co-wrote with Grahame Ware.

He's also author of a book of horticultural humor, *The Garden Clerk's Dictionary*. You didn't think there was such a thing as horticultural humor? Heims disagrees.

Someone once asked him if he had enemies for a ground cover. He suspects they were looking for *etymurus*.

Cover story

Irreverent, playful and down-to-earth, literally, Heims is the man many follow to give their garden the "wow factor." He says he can just look at a seedling and know its "wow" potential.

Even garden diva Martha Stewart has been wowed, autographing a photo of herself to Heims, calling him "our favorite heuchera man!"

Larry Hurley, the perennial buyer at Bobbie Nurseries in Beltsville, Md., says the USA used to be a "backwater" when it came to perennials. "We bought mostly from Holland, but in the last 10 years or so the States have come to the fore, and I'd say Dan has been responsible for much of that."

David Ellis, editor of *The American Gardener* magazine, published by the American Horticultural Society, also credits Heims with drawing attention to foliage.

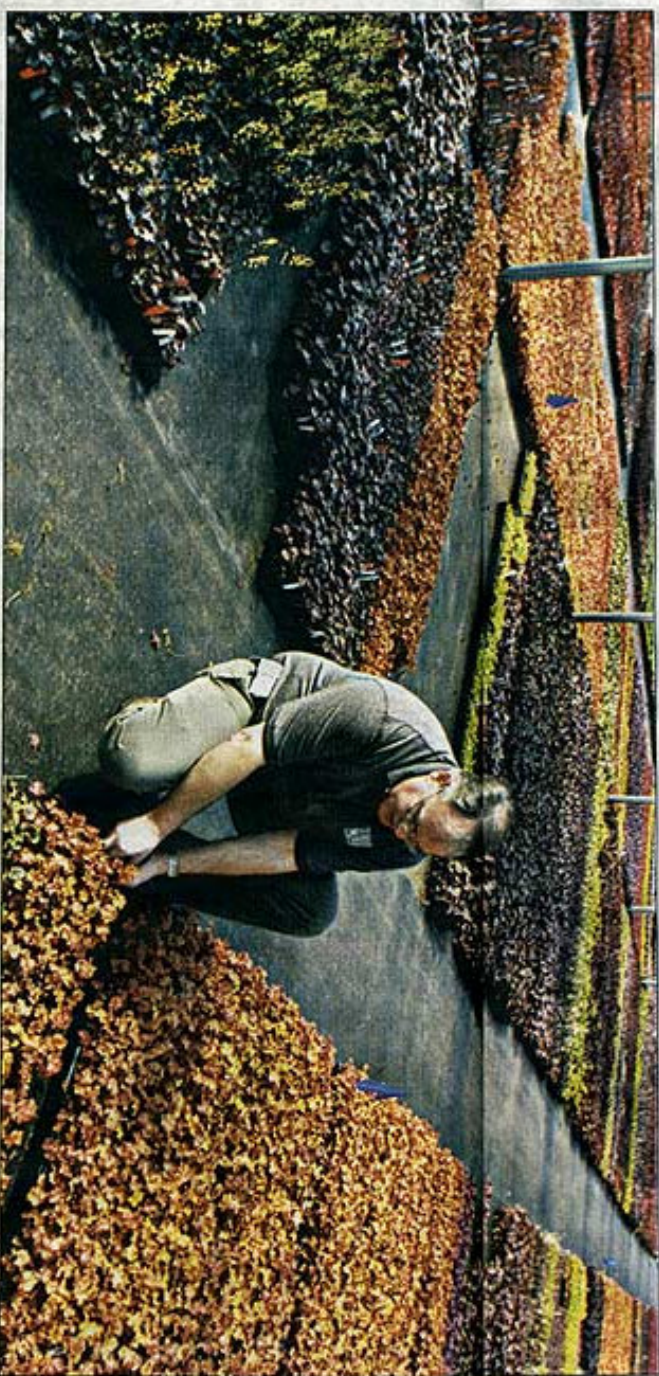
"People assume you only buy for the flowers, but Dan has shown that you can have foliage just as beautiful," says Ellis. "It's changed the way garden designers work."

A fairy-tale transformation

Hence Heims' love affair with *heucheras* and *heucherellas*, plants he has transformed from forest species with unremarkable foliage and small white flowers into "the Cinderellas of today's gardens."

"I essentially asked myself 'What genera are hardy in most zones, which plants have a rich representation of species to breed, and which plants are poorly represented in the trade?'" Heims says. "So just 10 years ago, there were 'essentially two heuchera in the marketplace, maybe two *pulmonaria*, two *veronica*, a *barbella* and one *heucherella*,'" he says. "We've changed that."

Although Heims has been in the plant business since 1975, when he graduated from the University of



Growing business: Ken Brown, Dan Heims' business partner at Terra Nova, kneels among a sea of *heucheras*, also known as coral bells, ready to be shipped to nurseries nationwide. BY LAURET CAHILL FOR USA TODAY

Oregon and opened an exotic-plant store in Portland, his timing has never been better than now. A record 91 million households participated in lawn and garden activities in 2005, says the National Gardening Association.

Heims travels the world looking for the next new plant, but he seems more than content just walking the Terra Nova gardens. He jumps from plant to plant, pointing out such subtleties as the "backlighting" from the sun through certain leaves.

And that *heuchera* over there? "That color has never existed in a plant in the world, and that's what makes this all so exciting." He readily admits he is a "hopeless hortiholic." His term.

For the record, Heims' home garden is essentially woodland, with a waterfall over a pond that contains "the hot hot blue heuchera can't find." A Japanese maple "forest" of 65 mature trees provides shade for his personal rare-plant collection.

His all-time favorite *heuchera* remains "Chocolate Ruffles." To go to New Zealand and have my daughter say, 'Dad, that's your plant!' — it don't get any better than that."

Like all Heims creations, that *heuchera* came about after years of research. Heims and his staff start

From just a dream to distribution



BY LAURET CAHILL FOR USA TODAY

Quench your garden thirst: The *heuchera* Lime Ricky, from Terra Nova Nurseries.

with a vast variety of as many as 3,000 test plants, winnowing them down to 400, then down to 20. But maybe two or three make it into the nursery's new catalog.

The bumper sticker over Heims' desk says it all: "So many species, so little time."

Every spring, Heims sends 18 of his newest prospects to garden writers, asking them to try them

It takes a village to raise a new plant, Dan Heims says:

- **The dreamer** (aka the plants man). Dreams up combinations of species and crosses them to create a new plant.
- **The grower** (greenhouse manager). Raises thousands of seeds to viable blooming plants.
- **The judge/excelsiorer** (sales staff/breeders). Narrows field to exceptional few based on bloom, size, foliage color, etc.
- **The scientist** (tissue culture lab workers). Rapidly reproduces chosen plants.
- **The production manager** (greenhouse production crew). Weans from tissue culture to bushy plants, then distributes.

"He's the plants man's plants man," Lowenick says. "Dan goes out and speaks, and he's able to generate excitement about the plants themselves that you don't get from other breeders."

He literally can sing and dance. Even for his size, he's quite light on his feet.

Such enthusiasm carries Heims to karaoke nights around the world, and the occasional nasal re-order performance, something Lowenick has witnessed firsthand. "It's quite amazing."

The names say it all

Offstage, Heims seeks assistance from fellow gardeners who send him photos of plants they think are unique and could be bred to be real contenders. Sometimes they are. More often, they are not.

"I have to break it to them gently that my grandmother had that plant," he says.

What's not in fashion at the moment? He thinks maybe *bergonia*. "So we offer something a little different," he says, referring to Terra Nova's Pink Dragonfly. "It's not as bulky, the leaves are narrow, and shiny plant-red winter flowers and shiny plant-red winter color, like no other *bergonia*," says the nursery's catalog of 220 plants.

Heims writes the copy for each. The Brit-Maine Crawford *ligularia* (with the black leaves) is described this way: "Black is where it's at, Jack, and this puppy does not disappoint."

"But the naming of the plants is another whole story," says Heims' business partner Brown, cooking his arm as if taking a drink, indicating that alcohol is often involved in the process.

Heims says he worked through his food and beverage phase — Champagne Bubbles, "Ginger Ale," "And then we moved on to passion," he says, referring to Black Negligee and Ruby Siletta.

"I like to close my eyes, say the name, then open them and see the plant as exactly that."

The best, of course, is when the perfect name is matched with the perfect plant. Heims thinks he's almost reached perfection with his "Sugar and Spice" *hanalei*.

"I can't improve this plant any further," he says. "This is a plant I can leave the earth happy about." As for his "plant porno" collection, it's nothing more than a collection of his favorite plants. Some 350 are in his Palm Pail. "I had one woman sit there for an hour looking at them," he says of a recent garden show incident. "She couldn't even breathe."

At home

Perennial favorites add flower power

What's blooming in the garden this spring? USA TODAY's Craig Wilson asks hot horticulturist Dan Heims of Oregon's Terra Nova Nurseries to suggest some of the best perennials to help your garden grow — in new and interesting ways:

A. *Heuchera* 'Stoplight'
 Zones 4-9

"Screaming yellow" and red-dotted *heuchera*, thus named because "you'll hear cars come to a screeching stop if you plant a mass of these amazing foliage plants by the road," touts the Terra Nova catalog. Produces white flowers in spring; come summer, leaves vary from straw yellow to green with a red center.

B. *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Looking Glass' silver-Siberian bugloss
 Zones 4-9

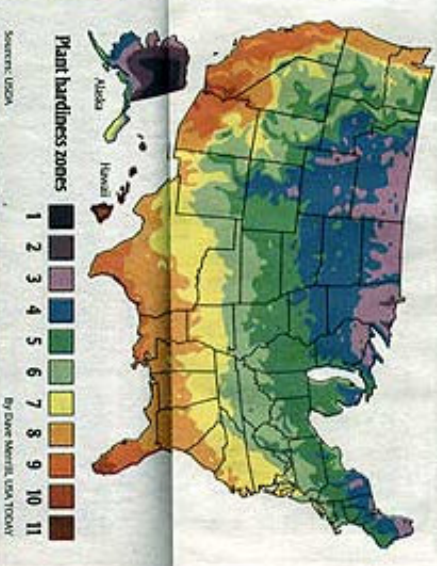
A mass of stunning, heart-shaped, silver leaves gives rise to blue forget-me-not-like flowers in spring. "Clows in the garden," Heims promises. Developed by Walters Gardens in Zeeland, Mich.

C. *Coreopsis* 'Mantua Blush'
 Zones 6-9

Peachy-yellow flowers with red eyes "burst" in cool spring and autumn temps. "Easy to grow and doesn't seed about," he says. Terra Nova's top seller.

D. *Heuchera* 'Obsidian'
 Zones 4-9

Mysterious and dark, with shiny, smooth leaves, this compact *heuchera* from Terra Nova sets a new black standard for Coth gardens. Pairs well with bright flowers in the ground or containers and holds its color all season. It's "actually shocking" when grown with a glowing gold *Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea,' Heims says.


E. *Echinacea purpurea* 'Fragrant Angel'
 Zones 4-9

Drought-tolerant, cutting-friendly coneflowers are "climbing the popularity charts," says Heims, who recommends the Saul brothers compact "Sunset" (butter yellow) and "Sun-down" (orange) *echinacea* (both Zones 4-9) from the Saul Plants in Atlanta. Terra Nova's own "Fragrant Angel" offers scented 5-inch white blooms with orange centers on strong stems.

F. *Heuchera* 'Peach Flambe'
 Zones 4-9

Bright peach-colored leaves that turn plum in winter, with white flowers in spring. Distinguished from orangy *heuchera*s like 'Marmalade' and 'Amber Waves' with larger, smoother leaves and flaming red tints in the name," he says. From Terra Nova.

► More on Dan the horticulturist: 1D