

## THE DELICATE ART OF GROWING ORCHIDS PROFESSIONALLY

### *Rosalinda Luna talks about being a woman in agriculture and the challenges of nurturing a fickle plant.*



**Rosalinda Luna at Matsui Nursery**

American agriculture looks very different than it did a century ago. Small and mid-sized farms are practically relics, eclipsed by large plots built for mass production.

As the structure of farming has changed, so have the people who work in it. According to the USDA, the number of minority farmers has grown in recent years. This development was preceded by agreements like the Bracero program, which brought in temporary agricultural workers to the U.S. to meet labor shortages during WWII.

Before the government program's shutdown in 1964 (due to allegations of exploitative labor conditions), it attracted more than 4.5 million Mexican nationals and changed the demographics of farm workers in America.

Rosalinda Luna has worked in agriculture for over 11 years. Born in Mexico, she has spent most of her life in the U.S. and is now an orchid grower at Matsui Nursery in Salinas, California. I spoke to Luna about the stubbornness of orchids and the challenges of being a female grower. A lightly edited transcript of our conversation follows.

**Valeria Pelet:** What drew you to agriculture?

**Rosalinda Luna:** Being the eldest in my family, with a brother and four sisters, I felt obligated to set an example for my siblings. It was difficult—but not impossible—because I was trying to balance a full-time job, a husband, and two children. Another reason I decided to study agriculture was because that's what my parents dedicated themselves to upon arriving in the U.S.

**Pelet:** How did you prepare for your career in orchid growing?

**Luna:** Two years ago, I finally obtained my associate of science degree with an emphasis in agriculture production. The summer before I graduated, I won a scholarship from the USDA through Hartnell Community College. That scholarship consisted of spending a week in Chicago, where, every year, one of the largest agricultural conferences on a global scale takes place: United Fresh.



This conference opened my eyes to just how vast the field of agriculture is and, more than anything, that the number of women [in the field] was not high. In my classes, there were always only two to five women. Even so, I kept taking classes to get ready for college and I got accepted. Before I matriculated for college though, my husband broke his foot and was immobile for a year. That turned me into the sole provider for my family. I had to put my studies on hold.

**Pelet:** How did you get the job at Matsui Nursery?

**Luna:** Six months after my husband's injury, I visited the company. I visited Matsui Nursery when I graduated from school. During the summer, there was a two-week-long course where we visited different agriculture companies. Matsui Nursery was one of the companies we visited, and Teresa Matsui, the president of the company and the owner's daughter, gave us a tour with the grower. There were 25 students, but it seemed like I was the one asking questions about PH levels, all of those things. I think that that's what caught Mrs. Teresa's attention.

At Matsui Nursery, the majority of supervisors, who have been with the company for almost thirty years, are men. I think that Teresa wanted to hire a woman, because everything was managed by men. When the visit ended, she gave me her card and told me that she was interested in chatting more with me. We talked after that visit, and she told me that she would very much like for me to learn more about the work at Matsui Nursery. She was giving me the opportunity to work a half-week here and a half-week at Sakata.

I talked to my boss at Sakata, where I had been working for nearly 10 years, and because he didn't want to lose me completely, he told me that he was willing to let me split my time between both places. But before I made my decision, I remembered the saying, "He who serves two masters ends up disappointing one of them." So I decided to take the great opportunity Teresa was giving me to learn from Mr. Arcadio, the main orchid grower who's been growing orchids for more than 40 years.



I'm not going to deny that I was very scared because I had left Sakata before to work at another greenhouse. The management at that greenhouse were all male, and I ended up quitting. I was afraid the same thing could happen at Matsui. At first, there some who didn't accept me. It was difficult, but in the end I was able to win over everyone. I understood that my chances of going to college now are a bit more slim, but, at the same time, another door opened because everything I have learned and hope to keep learning would not have happened anywhere else.

**Pelet:** What does the growing process of orchids involve?

**Luna:** When I arrive in the morning, the first thing I do is talk to the sprayers to agree on what chemicals will be applied to the orchids that day and in which houses they will be applied. Then, I walk through the whole greenhouse, which is about 70 acres, to see which plants need water, what type of fertilizer they need depending on how they look, or if they need another nutrient. This happens until about 10 a.m. Then, from 10 a.m. to noon, I'll take another walkthrough, looking at how people are working and if the job is being done well. I'll do another walkthrough after lunch to review all the greenhouses, whether they are all similarly leveled,

the windows, or go into the houses and check if they're at the right temperature—since if the temperature is too low, that could cause all the plants to freeze.

**Pelet:** What is the most important quality in a grower?

**Luna:** I think passion is important, because the work of a grower can sometimes be quite uncomfortable. These days, the majority of people want a job that's indoors, since the weather can be very hot or very cold. That's why, by being passionate for what you want to do, you won't care about having to endure different types of climate.

**Pelet:** How do you adapt to growing different types of plants?

**Luna:** I'd never worked with orchids, so it's been a learning experience for me. And there are so many different kinds of orchids. In the beginning, it was a little hard. These plants make you focus more; they're very delicate.

*Matami*  
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VALERIA PELET  
THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY



## NATURE'S GARDENERS

*Ants Protecting Their Turf*

Suburban home owners know that one way to stay on good terms with the neighbors is to keep the yard tidy, in particular making sure to prune overhanging tree branches that could bother the neighbours next door.

A species of ant on the savannas of East Africa, it turns out, takes the same approach. But for the ants it's more than just the right thing to do: it's a question of survival. They have some pretty tough neighbours.

The ant, *Crematogaster nigriceps*, is one of four species that live inside bulblike growths in the whistling thorn, a type of small acacia. Each tree is occupied by a single species, and the problem for *C. nigriceps* is that if the branches of the tree it is living in are in contact with others occupied by a different type of ant, it will be subject to attack.



Not being particularly adept at fighting, *C. nigriceps* usually ends up being evicted from its own tree. So the ant, as a research team led by scientists at the University of California at Davis shows in a study reported in the journal *Nature*, has adapted by becoming the master gardener of the savannah. A colony carefully prunes its own tree, nipping off new growth so that the tree does not spread out and contact others. The researchers noted that the ants are selective pruners: they don't waste energy trimming a side of the tree that faces open space.

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