

DESERT ROSE ROMANCE

PHOENIX HOME & GARDEN

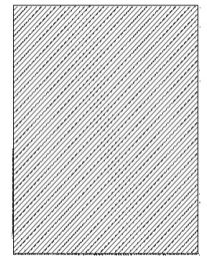
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An exotic plant species enchanted a local horticulturist with a penchant for color and form.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY LORI A. JOHNSON

In respectful memory of Dan Smith, a remarkable individual whose extraordinary life touched the hearts of many, and whose love of gardening will forever inspire us.

Dan Smith was addicted to adeniums. Commonly known as desert rose, these native plants of Africa come in a plethora of species and hybrids perfectly suited for the low desert's hot, arid conditions. For the Mesa resident, one glimpse of the unusual caudiciform succulents led to a passion for cultivating them.

When initially planning his garden, Dan was attracted to the tropical look of plumeria and thought they'd make a unique plant to grow in a desert environment, but a chance sighting of an adenium caught his fancy. He was hooked. "I loved the unique look of the caudex. They don't take as long as plumeria to blossom; they take less space; and the flowers are nice," he said. "I've been growing adeniums for more than 10 years now." Ultimately, his collection consisted of nearly 300

individual plants representing virtually every known variety. "I believe I have all except for *Adenium multiflorum*," he said, noting, "I lost that this spring."

Each plant in Dan's collection was tagged and in a numbered pot, which he tracked in a custom database. "I enter the date and what 'action' I performed, such as up-potting, trimming or seed planting. I add the pot number; the family, genus and species of the plant; and a plant and/or blossom description. Sometimes I even include a photograph," Dan explained. He also included the source of each plant, as many were ordered from overseas growers. "I have gotten seeds or plants from Australia, China, India, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Taiwan and Thailand," he said. One plant from Pakistan arrived packaged in nothing more than a heavy cloth bag, with Dan's address written directly on it.

The plant, a hybrid of *A. obesum* remained one of Dan's favorites, of which he had several, including his very first acquisition—beloved for its sentimental value—which was bent at a 90-degree angle. An unusual crested adenium and a monstrose variety, both from Thailand, also were at the top of the list. "I had a hard time finding these, so I value them," Dan recalled. "The crested plant had a difficult trip here. It was broken in a number of spots, when I received it." Other favorite standouts included an *A. swazicum* purchased at the Desert Botanical Garden and his first import, a cultivar called 'Star of Happiness.' Another cultivar, 'Doxon,' is credited with starting the multi-petal blossom trend, while the 'Dorset Horn' earned its place on his list when only three of the 90 seeds he tried to grow developed.

GETTING HIS HANDS DIRTY

Dan grew upwards of 75 percent of his plants from seed in a small greenhouse he built in his backyard. "Because I can control the temperature and, somewhat, the humidity, it's a great place to germinate seeds and





Dan grafted this vibrant red hybrid onto an *A. obesum* rootstock.

TIPS FOR GROWING ADENIUMS

Growing season for adeniums is April to October in the Sonoran Desert. Give plants at least four hours of sun—or more, including full sun for large plants—during this time.

- Plant adeniums in a fast-draining soil, such as a cactus mix with additional pumice and coir chips.
- It is virtually impossible to overwater during the hot months. Water approximately three times per week, making sure that each plant receives enough water to run out of the bottom of the pot.
- Fertilize regularly. Apply a low-nitrogen fertilizer as often as every two weeks.
- Adeniums go dormant when temperatures dip below 50 degrees. During this time, protect plants from winter cold. Bring them indoors or place in a greenhouse. Do not water when plants are dormant, as they are susceptible to rot.



grow seedlings,” he said. “Until an adenium gets big enough to go outside, it stays in the greenhouse. I love growing plants from seed. Give me a seed that’s impossible to germinate or grow, and I’ll take on that challenge any day.” He also built benches that display his collection during the summer as well as a shade house above them. In the fall, he disassembled the benches and moved the plants to the patio, garage, greenhouse—and even the house—for the winter, then set everything up in the yard again in the spring.

One feature he tried to highlight was the multitude of available bloom colors. “If you look at the blossoms

Purchased in 2008, the *A. obesum* hybrid ‘Star of Happiness’ was Dan’s first import from Taiwan.

BEAUTY

Many adenium blooms, such as this hybrid, fade into pale pastel hues as they age.



of the true species plant, such as *A. obesum*, you will find that they are light red/pink with little variation. All other colors come from the zillions of hybrids that are out there now. They include some form of red or pink with different stripes or formations. Whites have been around for a while, also. Only recently have the hybridizers developed yellows and blacks and now orange

and even some blueish picotee," Dan explained. "I still haven't found a yellow that won't fade to white in our low humidity and bright sun. I get less fade in my greenhouse where those issues are moderated." Bloom size can range from 1 inch across to as large as 4 inches, and many newer hybrids feature multipetal blooms.

SCULPTURAL APPEAL

Another characteristic of interest to adenium aficionados is the shape of the caudex, or woody treelike stem. "If the shape is interesting enough, who cares about the flower?" Dan joked. "To have a beautiful bloom plus an interesting shape is a bonus." Dan noted there are basically two forms of caudex—the enlarged, twisted roots and the bulbous mass. "There are also cultivars known as Thai soco, which are grown to have a very large caudex and multiple stems," he added. His wish list included obtaining adenium species collected from the wild, and he sought a yellow variety that doesn't fade, as well as a good orange bloom. "I'm slowly expanding my succulent collection," Dan said. "I love all the caudiciform plants. If it's unique and hard to grow, I want it."

Tall plumeria trees in the front yard of Dan's home provided shade for potted adeniums below.

