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# The Lost Hybrids of Leslie Woodriff

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Leslie Woodriff (1910–1997) had a gift for plant breeding, he was known for making the impossible crosses in the days before laboratory plant breeding. Leslie Woodriff made crosses that no one has ever duplicated.

Born in Quanah, Texas, in 1910, raised in the depression era, and unable to go to school because he needed to work so his younger siblings could go instead. Leslie fell in love with flowers and became world famous for his unique style in plant breeding.

In 1922, when Woodriff was 12, he helped his mother, Violet, open a small retail greenhouse business in Colorado. Selling begonias, gloxinias, fall bulbs, and lilies helped to bring in additional income for the family. Woodriff oversaw growing lilies from seed. When a doctor ordered Violet to a lower altitude for a heart condition, the family sold their cattle, moved to Oregon, and eventually began focusing on producing lilies there. Remember — this was the time of the Great Depression, agricultural families had to be mobile to find a place where they could survive.

In the 1930s, when Leslie began working with begonias, finding suitable plants for breeding was difficult. Plants had to be hand carried from their countries of origin and maintained in primitive greenhouse structures. Leslie was lucky enough to be located in Southern California at the time, and became good friends with Alfred Robinson, Rudy Ziesenhenné, and Roy Berry, the nucleus of the American Begonia Society. Leslie also was in contact with the families in Europe that had bred the original *Begonia* hybrids from the first plants brought back from Asia and Latin America. Always learning and exploring the possible crosses.

Running the family greenhouse kept Leslie



A glimpse inside the greenhouses at Fairyland with Leslie Woodriff (top). The personality of the man comes through clearly. Photo taken in 1975, courtesy of the collection of Johan Maks.

B. 'Splotches' (bottom) was a cross made in pursuit of fragrance but at the same time an interspecific cross of scandent type *Begonias* (*B. solanantha* × *B. radicans*). Photo credit unknown.

## Help Us Find These Hybrids!

The Hybrid Preservation Committee honors Mr. Leslie Woodriff in 2021 by trying to find, propagate, and preserve his hybrids for the future.

We want to find the following cultivars in order to get cuttings growing, and then make it possible for you to find the plants as well for your own collection.

from going to college. However, he managed the business and put his two brothers through school. At some point the family relocated briefly to Southern California, settling in Inglewood around 1933 and opening a garden center that specialized in shade plants and lilies. Leslie quickly became a circuit speaker for the newly formed American Begonia Society branches around Southern California, talking about tuberous begonia breeding and care. Woodriff met his wife Ruth, the daughter of a landscape gardener and orchid collector, and they were married in 1940. The family remained in California until lily virus outbreaks finally drove them to a cooler climate.

So, from Inglewood, CA they moved first to Harbor, OR in 1941, then about 100 miles south to McKinleyville, CA in 1970. In 1953, Woodriff's father was still helping with pollinations and operations, Woodriff's mother passed in the early 1950s.

Despite the distances, travel times, primitive greenhouses, lack of sterile workspace and how little was known about the plants once they arrived in the US, Leslie Woodriff did things modern plant breeders struggle with today. He broke rules, and made crosses no one else could make, because he had a gift. More scientific hybridizers scoffed at Leslie's methods, but no one scoffed at his results. He was known for carrying mixed

Name	Plant Type	Year
<i>B.</i> 'Alto de Serra'	Shrub like	1945
<i>B.</i> 'Baby Rainbow'	<i>B. Rex-cultorum</i> Group	1940
<i>B.</i> 'Bokit'	Rhizomatous	1975
<i>B.</i> 'Brown Eyes'	Rhizomatous	1973
<i>B.</i> 'Carol Imp'	Rhizomatous	1948
<i>B.</i> 'Cathansiana'	Rhizomatous	1948
<i>B.</i> 'Cath-Imp'	Rhizomatous	1948
<i>B.</i> 'Curly Cloud'	Rhizomatous	1977
<i>B.</i> 'Double Cross'	Rhizomatous	1947
<i>B.</i> 'Fairy'	Tuberous	1944
<i>B.</i> 'Fantasy'	<i>B. Rex-cultorum</i> Group	1941
<i>B.</i> 'It'	<i>B. Rex-cultorum</i> Group	1941
<i>B.</i> 'Ivy Ever'	Scandent	1947
<i>B.</i> 'Lulandii'	Cane	1935
<i>B.</i> 'Pink Fairy'	Tuberous	1946
<i>B.</i> 'Pink Spot Lucerne'	Cane	1947
<i>B.</i> 'Silver Cascade'	Scandent	1977
<i>B.</i> 'Two Face'	Scandent	1978
<i>B.</i> 'Versi-Cath'	Rhizomatous	1977
<i>B.</i> 'Silver Sweet'	<i>B. Rex-cultorum</i> Group	1947
You can also look these up on the International Database of Begoniaceae: <a href="http://ibegonias.filemakerstudio.com.au">http://ibegonias.filemakerstudio.com.au</a>		



*Lilium* 'Stargazer' was created by Leslie Woodriff around 1960 and remains one of the top selling lily bulbs of all time, over 36 million bulbs are sold annually. Photo courtesy of [lilypadbulb.com](http://lilypadbulb.com). All rights reserved.

jars of pollen, that he used to make crosses with, some containing 4–5 different species or hybrids! Most hybridizers put one pollen type on each flower, but Leslie saw advantages to multi-pollinating so that occasional synergies between compatible plants could create something totally unique. Leslie was an adamant species collector for his breeding projects, he worked with other begonia leaders of the time to get as many species as possible. Leslie crossed them and then crossed them again. Leslie was one of the first in the United States to make crosses between members of the *B. Rex Cultorum* Group and the tuberous begonia hybrids, as well as between the *B. Rex Cultorum* Group and both cane- and shrub-like begonias. Leslie crossed *B. herbacea* × *B. socotrana* to give us the *Begonia* 'Pink African Violet'. He loved the potential of scandent types and worked to make hybrids, crossing for larger flowers, colorful leaves and fragrance.

However, Leslie Woodriff's biggest commercial success was with his other love, lilies. Woodriff bred the lily 'Stargazer' which is still

one of the top selling lilies in world, over 36 million bulbs are sold annually. He also bred two *Lilium* hybrids that were the first placed into the American Lily Society's Hall of Fame - *L. 'Black Beauty'* and *L. 'White Henryi'*. Both *L. 'Black Beauty'* and *L. 'White Henryi'* are still famous for their vigor, their unparalleled hardiness, and disease resistance. But Leslie was not a businessman. When it came to larger issues than the family greenhouse, he struggled and usually came out badly in business dealings. Leslie received almost nothing for his efforts in lily breeding, but he never stopped loving the crop.

Leslie and his wife Ruth raised their children and had their nursery "Fairlyland Begonia and Lily Garden" in Southern OR. As a result one would expect to find more of his work in western US collections, however they are scattered throughout the US, Canada, Japan and the Ukraine. Check with your branch to see if anyone has plants that might be the work of Leslie Woodriff in their collections!

When writing about Leslie Woodriff it is easy to go on too long. He was simply a fascinating person. I am thankful to many different sources for the information here, any mistakes are my own. There are many wonderful biographies about Leslie, so if you are still interested in learning more check these publications:

- *Flower Confidential: The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful*, By Amy Stewart. Algonquin Books, ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-438-7.
- The American Horticulturist, Feb. 1993. Men Who've Loved Lilies, by Melissa Dodd Eskilson. <http://ahsgardening.org/uploads/pdfs/1993-02r.pdf>.
- Judith Taylor has two articles in Pacific Horticulture (below) as well as numerous botanical history books that are fascinating to read. <https://www.pacifichorticulture.org/articles/the-begonia-in-california-part-1/> and <https://www.pacifichorticulture.org/articles/the-begonia-in-california-part-2-the-begoniacs/>
- *The Begonian* August 1953 p 168-170  
Leslie Woodriff by Stanley Spaulding,  
Editor