

HARRY JOHNSON, SR BIOGRAPHY

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Johnson, Joseph Harry, Sr (1894–1987)—nurseryman, botanist and master hybridizer of world famous *Paramount Hybrids*.



Born in Los Angeles, California on 28 May 1894, Harry Johnson became a hybridizer of cacti with his *Echinopsis/Lobivia Paramount Hybrids* and other cactus hybrids.

The nursery business began as a water lily nursery in 1876 by Edmond D Sturtevant in Bordentown, New Jersey who moved the nursery to Hollywood, California in 1894. Harry became interested in succulent plants during his mid teen years while working for Mr Sturtevant. Harry graduated from Hollywood High School in 1912. After graduation Harry 1) worked a year for Title Insurance and Trust Company in Los Angeles, 2) took a course in book keeping at a business college 1913–1914, 3) worked a year in the Los Angeles Lincoln Par conservatories, 4) worked as a city plantsman in Los Angeles until 1918, and 5) to Washington DC to work for Dr David Grandison Fairchild (1869–1954) in the Bureau of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction as an ‘assistant plant introducer’. It was while Harry was at the Bureau that he met and worked with Dr Joseph Nelson Rose (1862–1928), of Britton and Rose fame. In 1919 Harry and wife Hazel moved to Alta Verapas, Guatemala where he managed a coffee plantation for 2 years. During his time in Guatemala he collected plants and seeds for various private collectors, the US National Herbarium and Dr Fairchild. Cacti were among the 6,000 sheets of pressed dried plant material Harry made during this time. Harry and Hazel returned to Los Angeles in 1921 where Harry became a teacher of horticulture in the Los Angeles school system.

When Sturtevant died in 1921 Harry bought the water lily nursery changing the name to *Johnson Water Gardens*. He worked at the nursery in addition to his teaching job. In 1923-1924 he studied landscape architecture and botany at the University of Massachusetts. He moved the nursery to Hynes, California in 1928 (renamed *Paramount*, California in 1948). By 1929 he built a second greenhouse to propagate water lilies and later added cactus and other succulent plants. In 1935 Harry introduced a separate branch to his firm under the name *Johnson Cactus Gardens*. The first catalog under the *Johnson Cactus Gardens* name appeared in 1936. Later catalogue covers advertised “Since 1876”. Harry published two catalogues each year, one on cactus and succulent plants and the other on water lily and other aquatic plants.

Harry became interested in hybridizing cacti in the mid 1930s. The first time Harry used the name ‘Paramount’ for his *Echinopsis/Lobivia* hybrids was in 1951 in his *Diamond Jubilee Cactus Handbook, 1876–1951*. It wasn’t until 1954 that his world famous *Paramount Hybrids* were introduced to the public in his catalogues. During the next 14 years 26 *Paramount Hybrids* were developed and released by his *Johnson Cactus Gardens*. ‘Lobiviopsis’ was the name he used for his *Paramount Hybrids*, but under the International Rules of Nomenclature, this name was invalid because it had been used earlier by Albert Fric (1882–1944) in 1934 for another cactus genus. The plants were bred to be free-flowering with brilliant colors and large flowers. To be true *Paramount Hybrids* propagation is by rooting offsets rather than by seeds.

The *Echinopsis/Lobivia Paramount Hybrids* introduced in Harry’s catalogues are: (*The following Highlighted hybrid plants and flowers are shown in color in the order presented below under Harry Johnson, Sr Images.*)

- 1954: *Orange Paramount*, *Red Paramount*, *Red Pygmy*, *Salmon Queen*, *Sunset*
- 1955: *Fluffy Ruffles*
- 1957: *Dainty Bess*, *Orange Glory*, *Peach Monarch*, *Tangerine*
- 1959: *Forty Niner*, *Kate Walker*, *Morning Glory*, *Red Meteor*
- 1961: *Betelgeuse*, *Stars and Stripes*
- 1962: *Aurora*, *Terra Cotta*, *White Knight*
- 1963: *Mary Patricia* (named after his daughter)

1964: *Watermelon*

1965: *Harlequin*

1966: *Red Riding Hood*

1968: *Blaze, Pink and White, Scarlet O'Hara*

After the nursery moved to Fallbrook, California in 1969, and became *Cactilandia Gardens* (a wholesale nursery), the following Echinopsis/Lobivia hybrids were introduced: *Atomic, Barber Pole, Blue Horizons, Heavenly Twins, Northern Lights, Pastel Peach, Red King, Tropic Sunset*. Although these hybrids were commonly called *Paramount Hybrids*, only the original 26 hybrids introduced from 1954 to 1968 are true *Paramount Hybrids* by *Johnson Cactus Gardens*.

Other cactus hybrids were produced by *Johnson Cactus Gardens*. The names and introductory years of Johnson's Chamaelopsis/Chamaecereus hybrids were: *Flame* 1951, *Blush* 1960, *Buttercup* 1967, *Fire Chief* 1960, *Vesuvius* 1958, *Yellow Peanut* 1960. Schlumbergera/Schlumbergera hybrid *Crimson Giant* along with Lobivia/Lobivia hybrid *Tricolor* were also offered in Harry's catalogs. He also successfully produced a few Echinopsis/Echinopsis hybrids. He experimented with hybridizing Echinopsis/Lobivia/Trichocereus species.

Twenty-nine *Johnson Cactus Gardens* catalogues were issued over a 33-year period (1936–1968). Pages per catalog ranged from 16 to 44. Harry's water lily catalogues were issued from 1928 to 1942 and from 1949 to 1953.

An explanation of Johnson's *Paramount Hybrids* is found in his 1955 catalogue: "These colorful cacti are the result of years of hybridizing and selection. They are crosses between various Echinopsis and Lobivia, and their progeny crossed and re-crossed. Many new colors have appeared. Particularly beautiful are the salmon pinks and rich strawberry pinks that have shown up this year. Since they can only be propagated by offsets which are very slow in appearing stocks will long be scarce."

Following World War II, son Hal handled retail sales of the nursery while son Ethan was in charge of the wholesale and water lily departments. The firm employed 10 full-time employees and 5 to 10 part-time employees over the years the nursery was in business. Employee Lawrence Gonzalez was an integral part of the nursery from 1934 to 1942, rejoining the firm after World War II in 1946.

Harry traveled through Peru, Ecuador, Columbia and Yucatan for 3 months in 1948 with John Akers (1906-1967) in search of new cacti. This excursion plus another Harry took in 1951 produced 50 new species of cacti. From collected specimens and seeds, new material was propagated for distribution from his nursery. *Weberocereus trichophorus* from Costa Rica was described in the CSSA Journal in 1963 by Harry Johnson and Myron Kinnach. Harry made other expeditions into Mexico, Baja California and Central America, and visited Africa and Asia during his lifetime. His hybrids of Disocactus/Epiphyllum from Guatemala he named Disophyllum.

Harry was president of Southern California Nursery Association in 1935 and of California Cactus Growers' Association 1952-1954. He was a charter member of Los Angeles Men's Garden Club and president of Los Angeles Landscape and Garden Club for 5 years. He received the Southern California Horticultural Institute's annual award in 1974 for outstanding contributions to horticulture. After receiving this award Charles Glass (1934–1998) wrote in the CSSA Journal that "Few have done as much as Harry Johnson and Johnson's Paramount Cactus Garden towards popularizing cacti and other succulents and making them available to the general public."

Harry was a CSSA Convention speaker in 1941, 1949, 1953 and 1957. He was on its Executive Board at various times from 1941 to 1957, and CSSA President in 1958 and 1959. Harry contributed articles to the Journal frequently. He wrote the popular "Questions and Answers" in the Journal from 1949 to 1968, making 45 contributions to that series. Harry Johnson Sr received the prestigious CSSA Fellow award in 1952 for explorer, discoverer and worker for CSSA.

Of all his achievements Harry was proudest of his *Paramount Hybrids*, with *Terra Cotta, White Knight* and *Stars and Stripes* among his favorites. His outlook on life was 'to pass through life leaving the earth no worse than it was before your occupancy'. Harry Johnson Sr died at age 95 on 17 November 1987.

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