



THE RADAR TRENDS

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SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS: A worker clips high-fashion flowers in Carlsbad.

THE FLOWER BROKERS *Move over, Grasse! Thanks to His Sexiness Tom Ford, San Diego is becoming the new source for status blooms*

Fred Clarke is a mad scientist. But instead of a lab coat and an electrocuted mane à la Albert Einstein, the expert orchid breeder wears a pleasant, ruddy-faced smile and a flannel shirt. He may look the part of the average farmer, but his Sunset Valley Orchids greenhouse in Vista overflows with diverse and unexpected blooms from ornately patterned Fly Orchids—whose eau de rotting meat attracts fly pollinators—to Clarke's favorite group: Cattleyas or "queen of the orchids," whose vibrantly colored ruffled petals recall chiffon prom dresses.

After years of development, Clarke's experimental hybridizing—which he considers his art—birthed a flower previously dismissed as mythology: The black orchid. This incredibly rare genus not only shocked the horticultural world, but also sparked interest from tastemakers across the continent. It also became the muse and namesake for veteran Gucci and YSL designer Tom Ford's new scent, sweeping up San Diego in the current fragrance frenzy. And now our coastal haven—reminiscent of Provence—continues to define itself as a hub for horticultural couture and an inspiration point for luxe fragrances.

LEAVES OF GRASSE

Fashion makes history, even off the runway. A perfumed glove fad in the 16th century turned Grasse, France—once a center for leather trade—into the perfume capital of the world. The Provençal microclimate, which nourished a diverse range of flora, sealed the deal.

San Diego offers a similarly mild environment. "The weather here is not too hot, too cold, too wet or too dry," reveals Vista resident and orchid king Clarke. "It's a kind of Mediterranean climate, which is conducive to good flower culture." In fact, indoor flowers and foliage plants are the area's number-one crop, grossing \$311,050,300 in 2005. (Not to mention that the majority of flowering poinsettias sold in the U.S. get their start in Encinitas.)

Meanwhile, the perfume industry has exploded in the last few years, garnering \$2.9 billion in 2006. Just ask *The New York Times*, which famously hired a staff fragrance critic. And this season's "It" fragrances are all about floral notes, so flowers are at a serious premium.

Annette Green, president emerita of New York's Fragrance Foundation, first conceived of "a wardrobe of fragrances" in the late 1960s, when most women limited themselves to (gasp!) just one scent. The expert on all things olfactory, Green confirms that floral perfumes are all the rage. "Girlie fragrances are the trend right now," she says lightly. "We're seeing multi-florals, spicy florals and green fragrances that smell of grass or herbs from nature." The abundance of gardenia, jasmine, rose, bergamot, honeysuckle, orange blossom and bamboo notes proliferating on perfume counters is undeniable.

The floral trend transcends category too, impacting even the onslaught of now dominant flashy celebrity fragrances, accompanied by rhinestone-laden bottles and cheesy, soft-focused ads. CONTINUED...

Clockwise from right: The greenhouse at Sunset Valley Orchids in Vista; Prince joins the fragrance frenzy; perfume impresario Tom Ford; the blackest orchid known to date and the source of Tom Ford's eau de sex.



flourishing flower trade has potential for deep impact.

DIVINE INSPIRATION

Conceiving fragrances is a labor of love, especially for small operations hell-bent on using pricey ingredients. Emphasizing immaculate details, most San Diego-inspired perfumers skew chic and boutique.

The bespoke perfumery Memoire Liquide is based at the apothecary Studio at Fred Segal in Santa Monica, where starlets are drawn in droves like bears to honey. But sisters Robin Coe-Hutshing and Jennifer Coe-Bakewell, who

co-founded the popular shop and fragrance line, spent formative years in San Diego. Memoire Liquide's vintage-style apothecary bottles are filled with upscale mix-n-match extracts created in the spirit of nostalgia (hence the name). Robin's teenage sense memories have informed many of the "House Blends" and base scents. "I spent most of my days and nights outdoors [amidst] night blooming jasmine by Windansea Beach, Coppertone, suntan lotion, delicate orange blossoms wafting on the salty ocean winds, the smoky scent of (probably illegal) bonfires on the beach, honeysuckle vines creeping up my bedroom window, and concerts where the combined scent of cannabis, patchouli and musk was pervasive," she recalls wistfully. "And my own scent: Pure tangerine oil that I fixed with vanilla extract from the kitchen." So, many of Memoire Liquide's fragrances, including Jasmin Hypnotique, Fleur de Champs, Corsage and Lair Marine, are like love songs to the coast à la Joan Didion.

Provençal soap company Mistral is based in Sorrento Valley's Old Warehouse District, where founder Michael Tilker says, "You can smell the ocean breeze." Like his peers, the San Diego native emphasizes the importance of a discriminating palette and the perfect balance of high-end organic and synthetic ingredients for the most exceptional, sophisticated and complex product. Tilker not only draws inspiration from his environment, he actually sends samples of local flowers or fruits to his perfumer in France to help shape specific scents. "Certain notes aren't indigenous to Provence," he explains matter-of-factly, "so in order to be precise for a blood orange scent, California yellow grapefruit or certain desert plants, for example, I would FedEx samples to France. If I was creating a Torrey Pine scent, I would send them the tree."

Tilker also regularly sniffs around his Solana Beach farmer's market and The Flower Fields for stimulation. "If I'm creating a

...CONTINUED You're no one in Tinseltown without a signature perfume these days. Just ask J. Lo, who pocketed more than \$123 million from Glow, her first scent, or Jessica Simpson, whose edible Dessert fragrances created such a (saccharine) buzz. "It's a very big fragrance time, especially for celebrities," Green says, with the tiniest hint of resign. "It's a new category of fragrance that has never taken hold like this before." Last year, 23 new eau de US Weekly fragrances were introduced by tabloid rag favorites like Paris Hilton, Hilary Duff, David Beckham and Sean "Diddy" Combs.

Celebrity fragrance sales actually dropped 17 percent last year, but only due to market saturation. The trend shows no signs of relenting. Already this year, Prince introduced his inaugural fragrance 3121, a "white floral scent with a refreshing sparkle of crisp bergamot, opulent jasmine and gardenia." Celeb perfume newbies and vets like Jennifer Lopez (on number 10), Sarah Jessica Parker, Salma Hayek, Shania Twain, Gwen Stefani and Christina Aguilera are all set to launch new scents this year as well. Considering the powerful influence of Hollywood A-listers on the booming perfume market, it's no wonder that San Diego's



BLOOM BOOM: Fred Clarke (above) breeds such coveted (and complicated) orchids as the *Laelia speciosa* Memoria Robert Straff "Islander's Delight" (left).

...CONTINUED freesia soap, when we get extracts from Provence, we go to the flower market here and compare it to real flowers."

HEAD FIRST

Orchid breeder Clarke is also the general manager of The Flower Fields in Carlsbad, where one might find Michael Tilker browsing. Still, Clarke's private Sunset Valley Orchids greenhouse stash, which boasts rows of vibrant, one-of-a-kind plants and birthed the black orchid, gets Clarke most amped. (Picture endless racks of immaculate couture samples, and it's easy to relate.)

Like his most upscale local counterparts, Clarke—who's lived in San Diego for 45 years—sees flower breeding as a delicate art. He started working with orchids at age 18 under the tutelage of a mentor named John Walters, who still has a small orchid nursery in Lemon Grove. And it is only thanks to the resources spawned from years of artistic floral pursuit that the black orchids' parent plants exist. "I made a hybrid between *Mormodia* 'Painted Desert' and *Cataeetus* 'Donna Wise.'" Clarke grins broadly under his baseball cap. "Never before had a *Mormodia* and a *Cataeetus* been combined." The resulting new genus is technically named *Fraidelarkiana*, the specific hybrid is "After Dark," and individual raven-colored plants include "Black Pearl," "Black is Black," and, of course, "Tom Ford."

Clarke actually sold many of the hybrid plants before he realized the magnitude of his creation. There's an element of risk-taking when hybridizing, which doesn't exist in the newly popular predictable method of tissue cloning. The outcrop of blooms can be diverse and unexpected. Plus, a black orchid was considered an impossibility, so Clarke wasn't necessarily expecting one to emerge. "With hybridization, which is a diminishing craft, you make assumptions, but you can't always predict with certainty. That's why it's an art," he says, peering up at the greenhouse roof thoughtfully. Though many doubted the validity of a black orchid, Royal Horticultural Association judges deemed the flower black and an exceptional rarity. After all, even if Clarke recreated the same cross, there is no guarantee that black flowers would be spawned. There's a glimmer in his eye as he explains, "Sometimes the rogues are the remarkable ones. It's like couture versus Wal-Mart or ready-to-wear. I'm like a boutique and the product is unique to me."

Couture is something that Tom Ford can get behind. Soon after Clarke's first black orchid was awarded, the small town breeder was approached by one of fashion's biggest names. As Ford later revealed, "After really searching and looking for the perfect black orchid, we found this wonderful man near San Diego, California, who was in the process of developing the blackest orchid that is at this moment known to exist. And we were able to step in, and to work with him, and to actually acquire this black orchid. And the good news is that not only was it an incredibly beautiful flower, but it also had a wonderful scent."

Ford's Black Orchid fragrance not only draws inspiration from this rare bloom, but—using innovative Headspace technology—his team actually captured the flower's essence and attempted to recreate it. Basically, the odorant molecules emitted by the flower are collected. Then, using a solvent, the molecules are eluted and analyzed by quantifying gas chromatography/mass spectrometry, which eventually communicates appropriate mixing proportions to perfumers.

Of course, other ingredients were added to enhance the scent. There are notes of black truffle, ylang-ylang, bergamot, lotus wood and vanilla, to name a few. (And he hasn't stopped there; he's also recently released a Private Blend collection of 12 scents with names like Velvet Gardenia and Black Violet.) *The New York Post's* "Page Six" gossip column even printed a rumor that Ford specifically requested that Estée Lauder make the Black Orchid fragrance resemble "man crotch," a particularly odd suggestion since orchids are generally associated with female anatomy. Still, Ford's use of Headspace technology suggests an earnest attempt to maintain the integrity of the flower's natural smell. Clarke, for one, approves of the outcome. "The flower has a heady fragrance that you won't soon forget, which is actually sexual pheromones produced to attract its pollinator," he enthuses. "Like the flower, the perfume is unique and distinctive. You wouldn't immediately recognize that this is the flower it came from, but it does have that heady, sensual fragrance to it."

And you heard it here first: When it comes to sex in a bottle, Tom Ford chooses San Diego over France. So maybe, just maybe, the Grasse isn't always greener. ☐

www.sunsetvalleyorchids.com, www.mistralsoap.com, www.theflowerfields.com.