

Oscie Whatley, Man From Jakarta

By Michael Bouman

Published in the Winter 1999 Daylily Journal
© 1999 American Hemerocallis Society

Each year toward the end of April I help my friend, Oscie Whatley, Jr., plant his nine hundred daylily seedlings in one of the island beds behind his house. Cardinals flit to and fro in the flowering dogwoods, one of which Oscie hybridized over a decade ago. The gardens are full of memories. In one there's a red hibiscus created by Oscie's father. In another, the hardy geraniums Oscie hybridized have begun their spring growth. Throughout the gardens, the hostas and tree peonies provide structural variety amid the foliage of the breeding plants, the other 3,000 seedlings, and the specimens of recent daylily introductions from a hybridizing hobby that extends back in time to the fifties.

I became Oscie's planting partner in 1995 when I moved to St. Louis, looked him up in the phone book, and, thinking he used a peculiar nickname for "Oscar," fractured both of his names when I asked for "OS-key WAIT-ley." He told me later, gently, that it's OH -see WATT-ley, and that his grandmother, realizing that everyone would shorten the name "Osceola," had shortened it herself when she named his father.

Oscie grew up on the family's plant nursery in Longview, Texas, 65 miles west of Louisiana and 150 miles east of his Aunt Mary's nursery in Ft. Worth. Mary Stevens hybridized daylilies. Before he turned twenty, Oscie was flying troop transports in the Atlantic Theater during World War II. The Navy trained him to fly in St. Louis, where he met and married Dorothy Henderson. After the war he became a manufacturing engineer here.

In his spare time, he began to meet the leading plantsmen in the area. Will Dill was chief among them, a nurseryman and daylily hybridizer who selected and introduced the daylilies of Dr. Charles Branch of central Illinois. "Doc" Branch recalls Dill as "one of the dearest friends of my past. He would come and stay at my house for 3-4 days during peak daylily bloom and sit for hours in front of the better flowers taking data on the blooms. Then, when he finished we would go over his notes and pick the following year's introductions.

"He was here when my HORTENSIA first bloomed in 1960. I noticed him going back to it several times that day. After our evening meal we sat down as usual to talk about the day's notes and he said, 'Doc, I'd sure like to introduce that ruffled yellow seedling, but it wouldn't be fair to you or it. If someone like Julia Hardy would introduce it, it would win the Stout. It has to be introduced by someone with immediate national exposure.' So he and I went to the Chicago national convention a few days later, met and talked with Mrs. Hardy, and she asked for a guest plant. The next summer, I was called to the house with an 'urgent' telephone call. It was Julia. She said, 'your seedling just bloomed. It has to be introduced! And I want to be the one to do it! It will go through the awards in record time and win the Stout Medal.' How prophetic!!"

Will Dill, who died a few years before his own RENÉE won the Stout Medal in 1971, became Oscie Whatley's mentor in the 1950s. Oscie remembers giving him "the astronomical sum of \$30 for a starter collection. I began working with English cultivars from Perry and Yeld, because the British achieved width before the Americans. I wanted to create tailored, yellow flowers with wide forms, and it seemed to me that I could move toward something distinctive by taking a different path from the other hybridizers I knew about."

When Oscie's Aunt Mary learned of his new hobby she sent him a plant of the 1953 Stout Medal winner, REVOLUTE. "It was the most beautiful daylily I had ever seen. It wasn't wide, but it had a quality of color that set it apart." Color quality became one of Oscie's primary markers of daylily value. I've heard him speak so many times about the superb colors in the Spalding line, a vibrancy that carries all the way across the lawn.

Oscie expanded his contacts with other hybridizers and began to work with the Branch introductions that Dill brought to St. Louis. He grew a few hundred seedlings every year for fifteen years before seeing results that he judged worthy of introduction. Good luck and experience converged in his program in the mid-60s when he started to work with Branch's light yellow SOLO (AM '66).

For Midwesterners in the 50s and 60s, "Daylily Mecca" was Sarcoxie, Missouri, where the growing fields of the Gilbert Wild Company contained 300,000 seedlings. Every year after Wild had removed his selections from the seedlings, visitors were allowed to roam and dig as many leftovers as they wanted for a dollar a plant. One lucky visitor was St. Louisan "Rex" Rexroad, who discovered a wide, ruffled yellow seedling there and urged Oscie to use pollen from it. That's how Oscie got into the ruffled look. He dabbed the pollen on SOLO and kept a seedling that would later put him in line for the AHS Bertrand Farr Award.

The national convention took place in St. Louis in 1968. Oscie was the Region 11 RVP at that time, and he sent out an announcement that a new seedling named DAVID WHATLEY (1966) would be on display. The "seedling" was Dorothy and Oscie's third child! What convention-goers saw in Oscie's tour garden was a big clump of that heart-stopping SOLO seedling, JAKARTA.

"There were a lot of big daylilies then," he remembered, "but they were unsymmetrical. JAKARTA was obviously different, and it threw symmetrical seedlings. When the tour bus arrived at my house, a southern woman stepped out with a crowd of people who were watching every move she made. She took a long look at JAKARTA and asked in a loud voice, 'how much do you charge for that plant?' I had never charged more than \$5 for a plant, but I decided to ask her what she thought it was worth. She said, 'I'll give you \$50 for that plant' and I said, 'It's yours!' Before the bus pulled away I had sold nine pieces of that plant at \$50. Nobody at the convention had offered to buy my plants until she did. After that, my plants were in demand."

Even before that pivotal day, he had turned his attention to tetraploids. Robert Griesbach had taught him to treat germinating diploid seeds with colchicine. Griesbach favored this method because, although only 10% of the embryos survived the treatment, they had a better rate of stable genetic conversion than with an alternative method of treating a mature

fan. Oscie learned both methods and began to use a microscope to determine the success of a conversion by measuring the pollen. "It's often very difficult to know how to work with a plant if you're just guessing about the pollen. The anther of a conversion will often have both diploid and tetraploid pollen, sometimes as little as 10% tet. Some blossoms have too little tet pollen, so you have to check different anthers, different blossoms, different days, and learn how your plant operates."

Oscie used the best of Branch, Wild, and Fay to launch his tetraploid lines. He crossed JAKARTA with Wild's CASHMERE, a creamy yellow brushed with rose, treated the sprouting seeds with colchicine, and introduced a survivor as BELLERIVE in 1971. He crossed JAKARTA with Branch's superb HORTENSIA (also out of SOLO), treated the seeds, and introduced a survivor as ETZKORN in 1973. From the ETZKORN and BELLERIVE lines came two tet seedlings in the 1972 crop that Oscie crossed to produce LAHAINA (1976), a daylily that is to modern yellow daylilies as Abraham is to the Judeo-Christian-Muslim traditions. Patrick Stamile told me recently that without LAHAINA, his own extensive line of excellent yellows wouldn't exist. I've heard similar things from other hybridizers.

Oscie couldn't resist exploring fringed forms as they came on the scene. He worked Fay's SURREY into his ETZKORN line and, several generations later, produced a breakthrough that he named YUMA. Twenty years after its introduction, it is still widely marketed and used in hybridizing, including Oscie's new reds.

"The first year it bloomed, I moved it into one of these other beds," he said, "and forgot about it. It wasn't truly special on its maiden bloom. The next year when it bloomed I saw how distinctive it was; but the tag was gone! I wondered if it was a guest plant from one of my friends, so I asked everyone who'd sent me a guest and they all said it wasn't anything of theirs. YUMA had fringe, teeth, strong bronzing; it was the first polychrome fringed daylily, and pod fertile, too."

If Branch and Wild had been Oscie's launching pad, Pauline Henry was the rocket. When SILOAM MEDALLION came on the market in the early 80s, Oscie converted it and moved his JAKARTA-LAHAINA lines into a new era of bold yellow flowers. "It was the marriage that was simply meant to be. You should have seen those first seedlings! Wherever you looked, there was another introduction!" From this line came ISOCELES, CRUMPLE, GLIBBER MANNER, and SOLAR MUSIC, each one an imposing garden presence.

Oscie's most intense pursuit in yellow is now directed to a line from SOLAR MUSIC crossed with Kate Carpenter's JOHN ALLEN, yielding very large, distinctive flowers with spatula-shaped petals. BUTTERCREAM (2000) is his current favorite, and in the opinion of one prominent hybridizer, his best creation ever.

If Oscie had produced nothing but yellows, his place in history would be assured. But he has taken interest in all colors, if not in eyes and watermarks. He recalls a pilgrimage one summer to the seedling fields of Elsie Spalding, hoping to buy a good breeder for \$5 from her rows of rejects. "She was selecting for low scapes, and you could find any number of outstanding seedlings there, rejected simply because they weren't low." On that day in the

field he remembers seeing Patrick Stamile there for the same reason. For both men, the results have been magnificent.

Oscie selected a plant that later proved to be dormant. Converted to tetraploid, it became the basis of his superb pinks, among which PINK FANFARE is one of the current frontrunners for clarity and staying power. The Spalding seedling is pod parent. The pollen parent, Oscie's SEDALIA, is out of tet MY BELLE and that same Spalding seedling. Try as he might, Oscie has been unable to duplicate the color of PINK FANFARE. Its form, vigor, and big green throat distinguish it from the many superb offspring of Tet. BARBARA MITCHELL on the market today.

Knowing the limitations of a back yard program, Oscie seeks distinction by using distinctive or unique breeding stock. "You've got to think ahead and set yourself a goal that will still have a chance of looking distinctive five or six years from now," he says. "It will take you at least that long to grow enough plants to introduce. So don't use what everyone else is using today. Find what people are *not* doing, and put your effort there. Try for *unique* rather than *improvement*. That's why it's better to walk their seedling fields than to study their introductions. Observe the seedlings and notice what's missing there. That's what to work on. Then live with your selections for several years and introduce the ones that still please you after you've lived with them a while."

His strong, clear pink introductions come not only from his Spalding seedling, but from NEAL BERREY, SILOAM APPLE BLOSSOM, and a slew of others. The Apple Blossom line includes RED CANDY, BON CHANCE, and my favorite, ROSE IMPACT, a flower of indescribable and "tangy" intensity.

I was surprised to learn that pink is not one of Oscie's major current interests. He's moving into bright, big whites and bold, orange/apricot blends, and reds with an attitude.

JAKARTA was the launcher for his original red line. A \$1 red seedling from the Gilbert Wild fields provided the pollen for a cross that produced BUDDHA, a black red sentinel that won the Award of Merit in 1975. The conversion of BUDDHA found its way into other breeders' red lines in the years that followed, but Oscie was soon to drop it for the appeal of the massive green throat of Clark Yancey's CHRISTMAS IS.

"The green throat is what gives red its carrying power. If you look across the yard at red daylilies with orange throats, your eye will combine those colors into a dull brick tone. You've got to have green there." The CHRISTMAS IS line includes SLIGO, THREE DIAMONDS, KUAN YIN, and, several generations and outcrosses later, his most sunfast red, MOHICAN CHIEF.

His new direction in red comes from four generations of YUMA breeding and includes fiestas of color and form named MEXICAN SUNRISE and MEXICAN ART. Oscie crossed these with George Belden's STARTLE to obtain seedling #R-6004 (garden named "Bear Claws"), a deep red with bright gold claws on the edge that will no doubt result in some worn spots in Oscie's lawn when St. Louis hosts the national convention in 2004.

Oscie's good luck with melon/apricot colors came by way of cream and yellow breeding. Working with the tetraploid offspring of JAKARTA, he crossed a cream seedling with his conversion of McMillan's AGGIE SELLERS and struck another rich vein of ore. That cross yielded FEMME OSAGE, a plant that does well from Canada to California. It's a huge, deeply veined, tangerine flower with a bright green throat surrounded by a burst of bright yellow. In a hot and humid spell, these colors stop me in my tracks. Its sibling, KIMMSWICK, is a cream polychrome. Both were mentioned in Gary Harris's 1994 journal article, "The Best for Less."

The bright sunburst throat observed in this cross is a welcome presence in the offspring of FEMME OSAGE, including the robust, joyfully fertile PERSIMMON PUNCH. There's a lot of orange, melon pink, and apricot combinations in his garden these days. His ITALIA is certainly one of his favorite introductions, but, with an eye on the future, the plant he really wants me to see is seedling #O/A 6013. Naturally, I will have to clear out one of my prized ones to make room for that beauty.

I'm nearly senseless in my desire for Oscie's new whites. They come in all sorts of shadings and blends. I use FROST AVENUE because it has that blue-green, frost-defying, dormant foliage that I would like to see much more often in our gardens. I use his near-white TARTA, a child of his wonderful "melon-white" (my nomenclature!) FUSION, because it imparts beautiful petal width and good branching to its offspring. I'll get FUSION next year because it's such a great early opener, and GREEN GAGE because, despite a great deal of green, it resembles a huge pearl in the garden, and MORNING SPELL if I can find it anywhere because, to my eye, it is sublime. Who knows what he will name seedling #W - 6008? The waiting line for that one is already forming.

I write this as the seed harvest is nearing its end. Indian Summer is two months away. Oscie's roses and tomato plants provide most of the horticultural interest now. The seedlings we planted at the end of April are bigger than any I've seen there before. A few of last year's have save tags on them; hundreds of good ones will be dug and tossed next month. Here, there, and everywhere I see clay pots with this year's new conversions and plants being grown for conversion in the fall.

No "breakthrough" diploid has escaped Oscie's attention over the years. He's "wired" by telephone to a vast network of friends, acquaintances, and disciples who help him decide which few to obtain, convert, and work into his programs. The consequence of the breadth of his interests and the narrowness of his back yard is opportunity for the rest of us. He doesn't have the space to explore very fully the potential of his introductions, and he does not introduce in large quantities. Therefore, if you can get a new one from him, you will be one of only a few who are working with it, at least for the next few years, and you might do as well as he has, if not better, without ever duplicating his crosses. He has often told me of the astonishing success of his friend Harold Harris, who converted Oscie's CARONDELET and got much better results from it than Oscie ever did. When people talk about "the Harris yellows," they can't help but implicate Whatley, Branch, Dill, Wild; a large group of midwesterners who lived by a code of mutual encouragement.

It had seemed to me for a time that the key to understanding Oscie's approach was to see the line breeding only, but I now believe that the key to this plantsman is his curiosity ; that,

and his devotion to improving the daylily as a plant. Look at how many superb introductions are not from line breeding but from an experiment with a new conversion. Curiosity is what drives him to measure pollen grains, to measure the temperature of the garden soil, to see how different fertilizers and growing mediums affect plant growth, to think about the ways to determine the answers he seeks. Love of knowledge has made him a perennial student at the community college. It has driven him to share information, pollen, stories, home-made bread, sugary tea. He is generous with it all. Everyone who knows him speaks fondly of this quality of patience with those who seek knowledge. Because of these qualities, my fellow club members voted him a life time member of the board. He is our friend and teacher.