



LOS ANGELES CHAPTER

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<http://www.crfg-la.org>

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MEETING

Topic: All You Need To Know about Growing Dragonfruit, with expert Alik Shulman
Date: Saturday, May 17, 10:00 a.m.
Location: Sepulveda Garden Center

Alik Shulman started growing dragon fruit (pitahayas) 18 years ago at his home and built a larger shared orchard ("The Schulman Dragon Fruit Orchard") in association with the Thousand Oaks Chabad 4 years ago. He sells plants, pollen, cuttings, and multiple varieties of fruit. He is happy to share with us his experience and knowledge, and will cover the history and benefits of this amazing tropical fruit, as well as advise how to grow it, how to pollinate the flowers for improved harvests, and much more! Potluck time! Everyone, please bring a snack to share for after the presentation.

MEETING

Topic: HUMONGOUS Annual Plant Sale!!!
Date: Saturday, June 28, 10 a.m.
Location: Sepulveda Garden Center

Are you ready to add something special to your garden? Our Humongous Annual Plant Sale will be held this June. All sorts of incredible plants will be available for purchase, from small to large, and at fantastic prices. The event will be open to the public, so be sure to come early! The amazing Charles Portney will provide excellent information about just about everything for sale that day. All funds are raised to support agriculture education.

Because this will be a public event, there will be no potluck table that day.

Save the date!

CALENDAR FOR L.A. CHAPTER 2025

July 26	Organic Fruit Tree Growing & Soil Enrichment presented by Richard Richie
August 23	Tour of Paradise Nursery & Presentation on How To Grow Unusual Fruit Varieties in Southern California
September 27	Biocontrol & Beneficial Insects presented by Ron Whitehurst
October 25	Patio Tree & Small Space Gardening for the Kitchen (heirloompotager.com)
November 22	TBD
December 20	Holiday Party at Sepulveda Gardens

LOOKING BACK

By Deborah Oisboid

March 22 - Sylmar High School Agricultural Department Field Trip and Tony Stewart Memorial Plant Auction

We had splendid spring weather on March 22, perfect for an outdoor tour of Sylmar High School's glorious agricultural department fields.

After a delicious potluck on such dainties as spanakopita, Philippine noodles & chicken, chicken pot pie (without the pie), fried rice, three types of salad, cheeses, fresh fruit, and a lovely cherry pie, we were introduced to the new department head Stefan Strong, his teacher's assistant Ray, and junior assistant Evelyn.



Nine years ago, Stefan was awarded a scholarship from our own CRFG-LA chapter. After college, he eventually chose to become a teacher. As of this year, Stefan is replacing long-time Sylmar teacher, and a great friend to all gardeners, Steve List.

When Steve List began his own teaching career at Sylmar, his boss was extremely supportive of community involvement. The agriculture program Steve developed over the years focused on answering the question "How does what we do at the school enrich the neighborhood?" As a result, Sylmar's Agriculture Department not only reaches out to the local school community, but citywide and even statewide.

Now Stefan is teaching the students how to grow their own fruits and vegetables, how to eat healthy meals, and how to develop good horticultural practices so they can get a job "in the field." (Pun intended.)

Our eventual tour began outside of the agriculture fence at a butterfly garden full of sage, lavender, and other pollen-producing plants which attract many insects. It was still early in the season and some plants

weren't in full bloom, but we did see a couple of monarch butterflies.



At the edge of this garden is a beautiful mural depicting flowers, birds, and plants, and also a list of supporters who have contributed so much to the evolution of the program and gardens. The mural has much symbolism and all the names of people who have helped in the past.

The big planters along the fences at the entrance to the yard were growing unique-looking trees such as cape chestnut and weeping mulberry. They were originally started as a project to grow interesting species.

As we entered the gate there was a lovely display of potted plants and flowers on the left, and a waterfall with about a dozen hummingbird feeders lining the roof overhang to the right, which was quite abuzz with the flitting jeweled hummers.

There was a showcase fruit tree near the first greenhouse. It was a Peppermint Peach and it had some amazing striped, pink flowers.

There are two greenhouses. The first one is mostly used in cold weather because it gets too hot in summer and warm autumn. Stefan says it's the perfect growing location when the night temperatures drop below 30°.

The bigger greenhouse next to it contains tray upon tray of plugs donated by a San Diego grower. The planting tables right outside are where the students transplant the plugs into larger containers. Stefan says it's easier for the



students to work from plugs because it takes more effort to grow from seeds. Plugs grow faster and can be offered to other schools at an expedited rate.

Two years ago, Stefan grafted his first apple scion and immediately started teaching everybody else how to graft. Someone told him a graft is not successful until you eat the fruit off of it. He was very proud to announce there is fruit starting to grow on his first graft and he's looking forward to considering it a success! His goal as a teacher is for the students to feel that same pride.

He has other, more exotic goals for the program. He learned that Sir Isaac Newton's Apple tree is still alive. Stefan is hoping to eventually obtain some scions from it. Wouldn't that be something for a physics student to graft!



Past the greenhouses we saw the vegetable garden full of winter plants. With the weather warming up, all of the cold weather crops are starting to bolt. Stefan and his students will soon clear out the beds and plant something else appropriate for the season.

Stefan told us that if we grow lettuce, the leaves should be harvested from the outside to the inside, instead of cutting the whole thing out of the ground. That way you can enjoy fresh greens longer, and they remain full of natural energy and goodness.

On the corner of a grassy field stands a large, sturdy arbor with a beautiful wisteria vining around it. The vine is about 10 years old and full of buds, but we were a week or two too early to see and smell the gorgeous flowers.

Next to the arbor are half a dozen 100-gallon wooden planters, each with a single tomato plant in the center. Each tomato is a different variety of white or yellow or red, and are all different shapes, sizes and colors. The students will learn what the different tomatoes look

and taste like. (Or at least these varieties.)

Stefan was asked why there is only one tomato plant in such a huge barrel? "Because the tomatoes LOVE rich soil and they go crazy on the amount of fertilizer in the planter," he answered. The fully grown plants will grow to be about 8 feet tall and produce thousands of fruit! Stefan explained that the bigger the pot the more nutrients are available. The more nutrients, the bigger the tomato plants.

Nearby are several trellises with grapevines on them: chardonnay, zinfandel, and merlot. Yes, the students study wine making. After all, it is good to know how to market different crops.

Other economically interesting plants being grown include several varieties of mint, asparagus, goji berry, and potatoes. These help the students understand and interact with "real food."

Across the pathway are the acid loving plants: blueberries, rhubarb, azaleas, tea, and coffee. They all like the same type of soil: acidic! Stefan joked that blueberries love it so much they could live on coca-cola! (Which has a pH of 4.)



In the tree section is a Surinam cherry. These are *Eugenia Uniflora* which is classified in the myrtle family. Although *Eugenia* species are normally used as a decorative plant, this variety has delicious fruit. Stefan thinks the fruit tastes fantastic! However, the flavor does vary from tree to tree.

Another interesting tree, donated by Papaya Tree Nursery, is a jaboticaba which grows its fruit directly on the trunk. It is also known as a Brazilian grape tree, except the fruit don't quite taste like grapes.

There is a lovely greengage plum, perfectly pruned and gorgeous right now.

Stefan's favorite in their orchard is the Nixon Peace fig. When President Nixon went to China he was given a fig cutting, and this is the same variety. It is a rare honey fig with yellow skin and is very sweet.

The orchard trees have light water-based paint on their trunks. The students dilute the paint so it is half paint and half water. Stefan joked that they put one kid on each side of the tree and let them throw the paint at each other and it will land on the tree and that solves the problem. Just kidding. No, they paint the exposed portions of the trees to prevent sunburn. When the weather is 110 - 120° the paint will protect the tree. It's like wearing light colors or sunscreen.

Paint is applied after pruning, but before the trees leaf out. That's the easiest way to do it.

At the very rear of the field is an uncovered hoop house containing the widest variety of plants gathered together in the school. These are grown specifically for donation, and are shared with elementary, middle, and high schools, and with community gardens and nonprofits.

One corner of the house has been taken over by



dragonfruit vines which have been growing for several years and have climbed up about one-quarter of the way up the structure. Because there is a football stadium close to Sylmar High, and because of the nearby mountains, there are many bats which come to the campus at night and

pollinate the dragon fruit. Last year they harvested more than 50 dragonfruits, without any hand pollination!

Most of their dragonfruit vines were donated by CRFG-LA's member emeritus Edgar Valdivia, who also donated many pomegranate varieties to the school. Stefan is trying to get as many cuttings from Edgar as he can.

For those who don't know him, Edgar Valdivia is a gentleman in Simi Valley who has "God knows how many pomegranates and dragon fruit varieties." Edgar also developed a number of unique dragonfruits, and essentially started the Dragon Fruit Association in California

The high school's floral class works closely with the Agriculture department, and tries to use as much school-produced plant material as possible. This is partly to reduce expenses, and partly to get some beautiful, unique plants in their displays.

Meanwhile, the Agriculture classes are growing three 40-gallon containers of hops. Hops are a climbing plant and will grow all the way to the top of the (50-foot tall?) light pole next to it. Last year they harvested eight pounds of hops!

Interestingly enough, what's popular right now in the brewing community is non-alcoholic hop drinks such as hop kombucha. These are topics the students are looking into as well.

At the end of our extensive tour, which was jam-packed with fascinating plants and stories, Stefan and Steve raffled off several dozen fruit trees as a fundraiser for the school. A wonderful way to top off such as lovely day!



Many, many thanks to both Stefan and Steve for a delightful tour. We wish both of you all the best in your future pathways in growing.

By the way, one way to say thank you to Sylmar High is to donate large plant pots. They are particularly in need of 15 gallon pots, so if you have any to spare, please let them know. Or contact Deborah at editor@crfg-la.org to arrange a donation.

April 26 - Field Trip to Lewis Perkins' Garden

They say April showers bring May flowers but we Los Angelenos are used to earlier rains and drier Aprils. Not this year!

With heavy rains forecast for our field trip to Lewis Perkins' gardens, there was talk about delaying or rescheduling the event. And, in fact, a notice was emailed to all members to not show up until after noon instead of the arranged 10 a.m. start time. However, some folks didn't get the message in time, so there were actually two groups who showed up that day!

Our host was very gracious about everything and ended up showing off his garden twice.

Lewis' front yard appears relatively simple. A few trees, some flowers, a rose or two, some succulents tucked in here and there, all surrounded by a sloped hedge which provides privacy and a buffer from the street noise. But look closer! The huge tree near the fence loaded with blossoms is a macadamia. The loose-leaf shrubs are three types of pitanga (Surinam cherry): one which grows deep burgundy fruit, one hybrid which grew on its own, and one with larger pinkish-yellow fruit. Pots of epiphyllum cactus are hanging near two white sapote trees: a Coleman and a Sue Bell. Lewis says the two sapotes have very different flavors.

Outside of the hedge there are plenty of smaller jewels. Society garlic and wormwood grow along the driveway. At the sidewalk are abutilon shrubs (also known as "flowering maples") which were loaded with beautiful orange lantern-like flowers. Clustered beneath the abutilon were clumps of *Alternanthera Porrigens* (sometimes called "spreading joyweed") which were covered with intensely magenta pompom-type flowers. There were also ferns, birds of paradise, and a money tree which was being trained to climb the jacaranda.



Growing along the driveway were ranunculus and bromeliads, a camellia transplanted from his mother's house (*alexandrina magnolia*) which he's trying to espalier, pomegranate and feijoa trees, caraway and cilantro, three types of mint, and a very prolific holy basil. (They sprinkle the basil flowers on food.)

The fence is overgrown with honeysuckle, which makes a privacy barrier with his neighbor.



A cotton tree spreads its branches flat against the house wall, with colorful Jupiter's beard and narcissus underneath.

Just outside the backyard gate is a narrow garden containing a very small Reed avocado with huge fruits on it, completely out of proportion to the size of the tree. There is also a Fuerte avocado and several roses in the same garden bed. Lewis says the

roses love the heat coming off the driveway. And he showed us an empty hummingbird nest in the Fuerte. (The eggs had hatched, and the babies had flown off.)

The backyard looks small but is packed with edible and rare plants. Several fig trees are growing near the stairs leading to the house, including Perretta® fig and a yellow long neck fig (from Edgar Valdivia, the CRFG-LA member who cultivated it). There is plenty of sage and tarragon, fennel and lemon balm, sorrel and chard, Mexican marigolds and purple kale, frisee and Chinese greens, and nasturtium.



Lewis' wife, Tara, is a cook. She said they use the herbs all the time for teas, soups, and lots of other

dishes. For instance, nasturtium, lemon balm, and fennel make a good base to which you can add almost anything. Tara enjoys the combination for tea. She also told us every part of nasturtium plants are edible, including the leaves and seeds. She thinks the seeds taste like wasabi. I tasted one and it was pretty mild - until the end when it kicked me in the taste buds!! Wow, that was spicy!

Elderberries and goji share the same garden bed.

Towards the center rear of one side is a sculpture which Lewis made when he was younger, and also a huge waterfall of staghorn ferns. Strawberry guavas line the fence and are currently loaded with buds. Epiphyllum cactus hang in pots all around the garden. (Did you know their fruit was edible?)



There are so many interesting fruit trees throughout the back garden. There are Pakistan and Aghan mulberries, plus one mulberry which grows burgundy color fruit. He has two huge longan trees, which have just finished fruiting for the year and are about to put out new flowers. Dozens of avocados line the back fence (Pinkerton, Esther, and other varieties), which Lewis calls their "avocado jungle."



He has two large coffee bushes (Kona and Java) and several seedlings. There is a huge cage full of fava beans. A Hawaiian and a Malaysian guava grow side by side. There are also large clumps of ginger, a huge pecan tree almost taller than the nearby telephone pole, a

jaboticaba tree, ga fuji apple, and igantic clumps of artichokes which Lewis says grow as tall as 10 feet every year with the chokes growing at the very top.

In spite of the dense canopy of trees, herbs and vegetables thrive in the garden. Starter plants of tomato, eggplant, peppers, and others and line the

paths in between the herbs. Lewis uses a trench method to keep them watered. He digs a small ditch near the plants which allows water to slowly seep into the ground without disturbing the roots. However, Lewis admits he loses some of the hard-grown fruit and vegetables to the local varmints. He has completely given up growing cucumbers and is almost considering looking up recipes for squirrel stew!

Lewis and Tara have lived at this house for more than 20 years. He says the soil didn't use to be good. He added char, labor, probably four grand worth of dirt and additives. There are at least seven cubic yards dug in to enrich the soil. And the results speak for themselves!

The paths are made from various materials. Some sections have smooth paving stones in squares and rectangles. Other sections are wood-lined zones full of loose black river pebbles, or harsh lava rock.



There is an outdoor shower to wash off garden dirt above a flat cement pad, but it's so well hidden you don't notice it unless you're actively looking for it.

There are very few plants growing in the backyard that aren't edible, such as dusty miller, clematis, a pale pink flowering trumpet vine, and an old English oak tree

transplanted when it was just a seedling.

All in all, it is a delicious and inspirational garden, well worth risking the damp weather for a visit. Thank you so much Lewis and Tara for sharing your cornucopia with us - twice in one day!!

