

## Features

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### Behind the Variety: Reinventing a Classic

Katie Elzer-Peters



Abbott-Ipco, Inc. and Classic Caladiums, a wholly owned subsidiary of Abbott-Ipco, are on a mission. “I think caladiums deserve the same attention and promotion that six packs of marigolds and petunias get,” says Bob Hartman, President and CEO of Classic Caladiums, and the plant breeder responsible for the blockbuster new varieties they’ve introduced since 2007. “It’s a sleeper crop.”

With the focus on foliage adopted by designers, writers and savvy gardeners wanting season-long color without constant maintenance, caladiums have a fighting chance to jump from houseplant assortments and the shade section to fully utilized landscape plants. The recent revival started with a virus.

The year was 1969 and Bob was at the University of Florida, working in the tissue culture lab and studying the Dasheen Mosaic Virus in Calla Lilies.

“Part of the research was surveying plants in the Aroid family—and caladiums are part of that family—for the presence of the virus. Everything was infected,” he says. This is a massive problem for vegetatively propagated plants.

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*Pictured: Burning Heart (top) and Miss Muffet (bottom)*

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While the Dasheen Mosaic Virus doesn’t kill the caladiums, necessarily, it interferes with their appearance and vigor—all reasons for gardeners and growers not to grow caladiums.

“While working with plants over the years,” says Bob, “I would think, ‘There’s so much genetic potential in these plants. It just needs to be unlocked. Why isn’t anyone doing anything with them?’” Thirty years later, he’d get his chance. In 2000, Bob came back to caladiums, forming the partnership with Abbott-Ipco and opening Classic Caladiums, the farm in Florida where he and his team work on breeding and growing.

Today, they're elevating the profile of this tropical plant that reached peak popularity during the World's Fairs of the mid to late 1800s by culturing and growing new, virus-free germplasm from established (classic) varieties and hybridizing, trialing and introducing completely new varieties.

Bob adds: "We have plants in shades of yellow, lavender, black, orange—all in various stages of production." But while those will be breakthroughs in the genus, almost guaranteed to raise eyebrows and create new interest, Bob says, "From crossing to introduction takes about seven years. I cannot be concerned with fads."

Sometimes the stars align, though. "Burning Heart was one of the most talked about plants this year at TPIE," said Richard Hollander, President of Abbott-Ipco. This large, fancy-leafed variety has bronze-red leaves with orange flecks and it's stunning. For Bob, the plant's a winner because it gets high marks in the criteria they use to evaluate new varieties: habit, yield, disease resistance and beauty. He says, "It's just dumb luck that Marsala happened to be the Pantone color of the year when we introduced Burning Heart."

Classic Caladiums and Abbott-Ipco also have cleaned up and brought back older varieties and bred new substitutes for popular types. Candidum, white with green veins, is one of the most popular varieties on the market, but it's been around for more than 100 years.

"In a century, the market changes a lot," Bob says. Growers have different needs. Consumers have different interests. They re-cultured Candidum so that their stock is young and disease-free, but they've also developed two newer varieties—Allure and Snowdrift—that look like Candidum, but don't need to be de-eyed for lush, full growth and stay white even in the sun.

"At our recent open house we had people touring the displays saying, 'I didn't know you could do that with a caladium!'" says Bob. Mission accomplished.

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