

Moraga Garden Center – a Business Like No Other

By Sophie Braccini



Kenny Murakami, with a young Japanese maple.

Photo Sophie Braccini

The Moraga Garden Center is the domain of Kenny Murakami who, like a priest ministering in his church, celebrates and shares his love of plants every day. Returning customers have made this business a success for 30 years. Some of them are more than clients, they are aficionados who seek out Murakami because they know that whatever their question is, he is the man with the answer; while others spend time there in search of hidden botanical treasures.

"I must go there once a week; I just can't drive by and not stop," says

Moraga resident Bobbie Preston, who has completely redone her garden with plants from the Moraga Garden Center because, beyond his good plants, Murakami has given her advice about what will work and how to make it thrive. "There are a lot of us who just love Kenny," she says with a warm smile. "My husband calls him my 'other husband.'"

The nursery is organized with plants in alphabetical order by botanical name, with specific areas for maples, bamboo, fruit trees, native plants, and seasonal displays of roses, day lilies, vegetable and herbs. "Peo-

ple want to be here because they can find treasures. Kenny has a selection of native plants and things you won't find anywhere else," says John Hessler of Lafayette, who was in the nursery exploring the natives section and found a rare *Sphaeralcea munroana*, a beautiful, fast-growing desert plant that produces orange flowers. "If you go through here you will be amazed at some of the plants you will find, hidden not just among the natives, but everywhere else," adds Hessler.

Rebecca Wiseman was a customer when she worked as a judge with the 5th District Court of Appeal.

"He taught me how to garden in the East Bay, how to deal with clay soil, with deer and critters," she remembers, "and sometimes I came here just for the peacefulness of the place, as a refuge." When Wiseman retired she asked Murakami if she could work at the Moraga Garden Center. "I knew this would be a good place to work; Kenny is like a father figure," she adds. Wiseman took classes at Merritt College and started working, learning along the way. She describes Murakami's teaching as following a Socratic method. "You ask questions, he asks questions and you learn from there." Wiseman adds that she's loved learning about flowers, textures, colors, creating pictures with nature and understanding what plants are compatible with each other. "There is one thing that is very important to Kenny – that we never give a wrong answer to a customer," she says. "If we don't know something, we can find the answer by going to him, or in the office library."

Young James Creek worked for Murakami during the summers of

2012 and 2013. He met Murakami when he was restoring a creek by planting native plants as his Eagle Scout project; he appreciated the free advice and great deal on plants. "I liked Kenny a lot as a boss," says Creek. "He always kept us busy, but also asked us what we wanted to do. I learned a lot just shadowing him." Creek also appreciates the fact that Murakami refuses to sell anything that is on the list of California invasive plants. "It's not illegal to sell them, but Kenny decided that he would not contribute to the problem and he would rather lose a sale."

Murakami, who has little interest in self-promotion, declined to be interviewed for this article. "What Kenny really wants is for people to succeed in their gardening," concludes Creek.

Lamorinda Weekly business articles are intended to inform the community about local business activities, not to endorse a particular company, product or service.

business briefs

Unique Gift Shop Opens in Orinda

Echo Grove
2 Theatre Square #112, Orinda
(925) 253-1266, www.echogrovestore.com



Dean Shutt at his store, Echo Grove in Orinda's Theatre Square.

Photo Sophie Braccini

Mags Doty and Dean Shutt have opened their first retail store in April. The couple comes from the virtual world; Doty spent 12 years with Cisco, while Shutt was doing online producing. They wanted to work together at something that would be more tangible and real. "We talked about a gift shop and we decided that it would be cool to sell only things that are handmade," says Shutt. "When we choose something it is because it is cool first, then second, it has to have been uniquely made by hand by an artisan." The wide range of gifts can accommodate almost any occasion and includes cards, candles, belts, hats, buckles, iPad covers, beauty and skin products, pottery, diaper bags, dog treat bags, reusable sandwich bags and a few things for children. "It's been a lot of fun," says Shutt, who is in charge of sales, displays and building the fixtures in the store; Doty handles the purchasing. The two entrepreneurs are learning by doing. "We've read a couple of books and just started doing it," says Shutt. "We chose Orinda at first sight and so far it's worked really well." Echo Grove is open Monday-Saturday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. and from noon to 5 p.m. on Sunday; it is located in Theatre Square, halfway between Sweet Dreams and Barbacoa.

News from the three Chambers of Commerce Lafayette

Chamber mixer from 5:30 to 7 p.m. on Wednesday, June 11 at The Mechanic, 3328 Mt. Diablo Blvd.

Rock the Plaza from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. on June 6, 13, 20, and 27 at the Lafayette Plaza Park. Find a detailed program at www.lafayettechamber.org.

Save the date for the July Mega Mixer at Cal Shakes with six chambers of commerce, from 5:30 to 7 p.m. on Wednesday, July 9 at 100 Shakespeare Way, Orinda.

Moraga

Save the date for the all-day Moraga Chamber Golf Tournament to be held July 14. For more information, go to www.moragachamber.org.

Orinda

Chamber mixer from 5:30 to 7 p.m. on Thursday, May 22 at RPM Mortgage, 51 Moraga Way #2, Orinda (across from CVS Pharmacy).

Ribbon cutting for Echo Gove from 5:30 to 7 p.m. on Thursday, May 29 at 2 Theatre Square #112, Orinda.

Save the date for the first Chamber Brunchon, from 8 to 9:30 a.m. on Tuesday, June 17 at Barbacoa in Theatre Square. Enjoy delicious brunch food while meeting with the board of directors and ambassadors, hear the annual report presentation, and get the latest chamber news. RSVP to Candy Kattenburg at info@lamorindachamber.org; the cost is \$10.

If you have a business brief to share, please contact **Sophie Braccini** at sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

Correction, issue date May 7, 2014, Orinda Trivia Bee Buzz:

The winners of the April 25 Orinda Trivia Bee received a check payable to their favorite non-profit in the amount of \$500 and also won a raffle prize valued at \$150.

Celebrating our 10th Anniversary *Thank you Lamorinda*

Offering Complete Systems, Upgrades & Universal Remote Solutions
Proudly Serving The Lamorinda Community Since 2002

SOUNDWORKS

Free-In-Home Estimates
925-209-7001
P.O. Box 365
Moraga, CA 94556

Orinda Motors

Has The Expertise For All Of Your Vehicles!

ASE Master Technicians that have specific experience with the vehicles you drive, Domestic, European & Asian.



Hybrid trained & equipped!



We have the specific diagnostic equipment required for your needs.



The Bay Area's premium classic car specialists.



We can perform all required maintenance while your vehicle is under factory warranty.

Use A Local Company That Supports Our Community!

63 Orinda Way, Orinda, Ca., 94563 (925)254-2012

www.orindamotors.com

