

He's Planning the Perfect Lily . . .

Farmer Sandy Best's Flowers Win Top Honours at the Shows . . . But They're Not Good Enough for Scientist Best!

By Fergus Crean
in Mayfair Magazine

In a tiny, cluttered room in the Botany Building of the University of Toronto, a tall youth of 23 can be found almost any day — or night, for that matter — peering through a microscope.

The son of a world-famous medical scientist, he could be intent on tracking down some obscure medical mystery, but in actual fact Charles Alexander Best, known as Sandy, is interested in lilies. He is working on a doctorate on cytology, which is the study of the identification of plants and their cell structure, and he has found lilies provide a highly suitable method of doing it because lily cells are comparatively large and easy to work with. But when Sandy sheds his stained laboratory smock which with his heavy-rimmed glasses gives him a professorial appearance, his interests switch to the aesthetic as part of his favourite study, and he becomes Sandy Best, farmer and lily fancier.

On his father's 80-acre farm, Strawberry Hill, near Georgetown, 35 miles west of Toronto, he crosses and recrosses lily strains to produce new forms of almost breath-taking beauty. And he makes money at it, too, almost against his will.

But Sandy Best is no single track young scientist with a hobby which happens to be related to his profession. He also plays the violin and piano and paints — while still an undergraduate at the University of Toronto he had his own show of watercolor portraits, landscapes and semi-abstracts, he carries out the duties of vice president of the North American Lily Society and secretary of the Halton County Progressive Conservative Association, and he is also a member of the Royal Horticultural Society. At the University of Toronto he lectures on cytology to medical students.

At first glance it is hard to understand how Sandy failed to become a medical doctor, but on closer examination, it becomes clear that his work is actually no further removed from the medical profession than the Botany Building is from the new Charles H. Best Institute just across Queen's Park. His father is Dr. Charles H. Best who with Sir Frederick Banting, discovered insulin in 1921. His father's father was also a doctor, and his 19-year old brother, Henry, is a medical student. But, the study of cytology can readily switch to medicine or zoology, because cells are basic to all living material. A cytologist can branch off into the study of genetics, which is the science of breeding, or direct his energies to such an important field as human cells and their abnormalities, such as cancer.

Sandy has been interested in farming almost since he was old enough to walk. Before he was eight he had raised hens and sheep. When he was 12 years old a Scottish gardener at Strawberry Hill showed him the little black bulbs which grow at the base of the leaves of Chinese tiger lilies. Sandy planted some. "I suppose it was my own Scotch nature," he says. "Like getting something for nothing." To his delight they grew, and the three-year cycle from bulb to flower so fascinated him he became a lily enthusiast. It also cemented his interest in gardening, and his next project was strawberries. From time to time he bought strawberry plants and got his father, mother and brother to help him plant and harvest them.

He went on to other types of flowers, and was soon growing several hundred varieties of lilies, irises and daffodils, spread over six acres, and selling cut flowers by the thousand to a large greenhouse in Brampton. He also began growing pepper squash because they take

little care during the growing season, leaving him free to work on lilies. Any profit from the commercial products usually goes toward buying more lily bulbs. "The purpose of the farm is not to make money," he explains. He has developed several new types of lilies in the past four years; he feels it will be another three or four before he has developed them to the point where he can name them and market them in quantity.

During the war, when Sandy's father was a surgeon-captain and director of medical research in the Canadian navy, Sandy took over the entire running of the farm, with assistance from his mother and brother and a hired man. The next milestone in his career came when he majored in chemistry. He spent two summers working at the Government's Central Experimental Farm at Ottawa, and had a stroke of luck when the plant breeder had to go on a trip. Looking for a substitute and having heard that Sandy had been doing some plant breeding at home, officials put him in charge of the flower-breeding department. Sandy had been working as a laborer at sixty cents an hour, and still at the same wages, was sent complete with car and chauffeur on his own field expedition to the Eastern Townships to collect native lilies.

Sandy won his B.A. in 1952, began postgraduate study and joined the botany department staff in charge of the medical lab where he lectures to medical students. Meanwhile he is working on a thesis for his Ph.D. which will deal with aspects of the cell structure of the lilies. He was also granted a research fellowship by Toronto's Sick Children's Hospital under which he is making a study of pollen grains and mold spores in the air, information which is expected to be useful in the treatment of allergy.

"My interest in botany is in the pure science," he says, "but I believe Canada has a tremendous responsibility to improve the agricultural standard of economically poor countries in the world, and people with the technical knowledge and the ability to pass it on have a responsibility as Christians. I believe that agricultural teaching should be combined with medical mission work, because medical aid has to have a foundation in agriculture."

Sandy's "purely scientific" interest in botany, is however, combined with the greenest of thumbs. At the annual show of the North American Lily Society, held last July in Hamilton, Sandy's specimens won 35 prizes including two silver medals and the trophy for "best spike in show."

He won the largest number of points in the show among exhibitors from all parts of Canada and the U.S. "But we were fortunate in being just a few miles from Hamilton," he says. "It was a big advantage to get our entries there fresh."

This year's show will be held in Seattle, and he plans to fly a few exhibits to it. He is thinking of organizing an annual Ontario show if he can find enough interested growers in Eastern Canada. Sandy's enthusiasm for lily growing and breeding is infectious and he will probably round up enough addicts to justify a show. He has delivered many lectures on lilies, illustrating his talk with dozens of beautiful colour photographs, most of them taken by himself on his own farm — which adds expert photography to his list of accomplishments.

Anyone who can grow lilies can breed them — and anyone can grow them who gives them what they need — a well drained soil (not soggy and preferably on a slope) and fairly constant moisture which is best ensured by a mulch mould around the plants. It is important that bulbs be firm and healthy, preferably with live roots. Lilies grown from seeds are more likely to be vigorous and free from disease, and some will flower during their second season, although others take five years or more. Seeds are also very much cheaper than bulbs.

A great many of the best hybrid lilies, says Sandy, have been raised by backyard gardeners. All that's necessary to cross one variety with another is to lift off one of the six stamens of one flower and brush the end of it against the sticky end of the pistil of the other. The pistil of a flower is the central part of the bloom. The stamens are wire-like lengths surrounding it. The fertilized pistil can then be covered with a drinking straw which is folded over to prevent contamination from other pollen in the air. After fertilization, the base of the pistil enlarges to become the seed pod.

One of the first requisites of lily breeding, of course, is to be sure you are dealing with lilies. There are many flowers with lily-like names which are not lilies at all, like Lily of the Valley, the Calla Lily, the Amazon Lily and the day lily. One way to be sure: all lilies have six petals.

Another piece of advice for backyard breeders is that don't be satisfied with the first offspring of the

two parent plants. Better results are usually obtained by re-crossing the children or the grandchildren with the original parents. When you believe you have a nice looking plant, then you can continue to cross it with other varieties to bring out such qualities as disease-resistance and strength. When you are satisfied with your new lily, you will have the privilege of giving it a name.

In Canada there is a tendency to name hybrids in a series, a practice followed by the late Dr. R. C. Palmer, of Summerland, B.C., who has developed the Sultan, Samarkand, and Sirdar lilies or Mrs. Isabella Preston, probably the best-known ornamental plant breeder in Canada, who has named a series of lilies after stenographers at Ottawa's experimental farm where she worked for many years. She is now retired and lives in Georgetown, just a mile from the Best farm, she and Sandy are well acquainted and the relationship has been mutually stimulating. There are fewer than 300 recognized hybrid lilies today but only about 75 species of wild lilies; about 45 from Eastern Asia, 20 from North America and ten from Europe. Most of these can be found on Sandy's farm.

There is a fable that the lily sprang from the repentant tears of Eve as she was driven out of Paradise. There are no known lilies quite that old, but the oldest — and also the most popular — is Lillium Candidum, also known as the Annunciation, White or Madonna Lily, also one of our oldest cultivated plants, which can be traced back at least as far as 1500 B.C. Replicas of it have been found in Minoan, Assyrian and Egyptian architecture, and it has been grown for a thousand years in China and Japan for food, the bulbs being eaten like onions. It is the flower usually carried in the hand by the saints of Renaissance art as a symbol of purity, and it has become closely associated with religion and is widely used at Easter as a symbol of the Resurrection. In the Middle Ages the Madonna Lily was also sought as a cure for wounds or snake bite. Medieval traders, selling the bulbs as medicine, spread the plant thru Europe. Eventually it became a common garden flower.

Speaking of symbols, the French fleur-de-lis which is prominent on Quebec's flag is not the only Canadian use of that flower. The deep red prairie lily is the emblem of Saskatchewan.

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