

# Kelly Griffin

## *succulent plant evangelist*

You might not recognize Kelly Griffin's name, but if you've purchased a colorful succulent recently, it might well be one he introduced.

BY NAN STERMAN

**K**ELLY GRIFFIN is one busy guy. He recently returned from three weeks in Cuba where he spoke at the International Organization for Succulent Plant Study's meeting and explored the island's flora. After a decade as curator of xerophytic plants at the renowned Rancho Soledad Nursery near San Diego, Griffin is embarking on a new position as plant research and development manager for Altman Plants. Located in Vista, California, Altman is the country's largest producer of succulents. And as if this weren't enough, Griffin co-owns and operates Xeric Growers, a wholesale and mail-order succulent nursery tucked into the hills northeast of San Diego.

Griffin's name might be new to you, but chances are, you know his plants. If your garden features any of the small, rough-surface aloes with names like 'Christmas Carol', 'Coral Edge', 'Angelo', 'Carmine', or 'Vinnie', you can thank Griffin (for a list of well-known Griffin aloes, see the sidebar on page 23). Or if you grow gorgeous variegated agaves such as 'Blue Glow', 'Sun Glow', or *Agave gu-*



**Top right:** *Aloe 'Christmas Sleigh'* is one of dozens of container-sized aloes hybridized by Kelly Griffin. **Right:** Griffin's seed-grown *Agave 'Blue Glow'* selection features narrow, upright blades edged in burgundy.



Griffin inspects one of the many forms of *Agave* 'Blue Glow' that he evaluates in his home garden.

*engola* 'Crème Brûlée', those are Griffin hybrids, too. In fact, Griffin has introduced more than 100 succulents. Panayoti Kelaidis, senior curator and director of outreach at Denver Botanic Gardens, credits Griffin's hybrids as having "propelled overnight the container succulent craze across the U.S."

Griffin does more than just collect pollen from one flower's stamens and paint it on the pistil of another. He is well known in the cactus and succulent world for being one of the top plant explorers, propagators, photographers, researchers, and speakers.

### CACTI INSTEAD OF COMICS

Kelaidis, who is also president of the Colorado Cactus and Succulent Society, refers to Griffin as a child prodigy. Indeed, Griffin has suffered from plant infatuation since age nine or 10, when he spent his days in the Redondo Beach, California, florist shop where his mother worked.

Within a few years, Griffin had discovered *Lithops*, the tiny, hassock-shaped succulents known as elephant toes or living stones. "I read an article on *Lithops* and wrote to Ed Storms, the guy who was the world authority," Griffin says. "I asked if I could get some and he sent me a box." Griffin devoured books about plants and searched out seed. "I was fearless," he says looking back, "I'd or-

der small packages of seed for any weird thing I couldn't find in a nursery."

At 15, he applied to work at a local retail nursery. The minimum hiring age was 16 but a small fib got Griffin his dream job. "They loved me there," he says and adds



Griffin collects pollen from hybrid aloes such as this one and makes crosses in his garden with other aloes that bloom at the same time.

with a chuckle, "I knew more about plants than some of the people in management."

While most 16-year-olds beg their parents for cars, Griffin begged for a greenhouse. He also asked for a book called *Exotica*, which came with a \$165 price tag. "I told my dad, 'Every plant in the world is in there!' It's funny now to think about how naïve I was," Griffin says. "Of course, it's an amazing book and it includes thousands of plants, but eventually I realized it's just the tip of the iceberg."

### PRACTICALITY VERSUS PASSION

In college, Griffin majored in applied physics, thinking he needed a "real job." Still, he indulged his passion for plants. Freshman year, he worked as a greenhouse laboratory technician. He remembers being sent to take cuttings from the famous desert garden at the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens near Pasadena. He went on a day the Huntington was closed to the public. "I thought I'd just died and gone to heaven," he says, savoring the memory. "The Huntington was one of the most exciting places to me back then—it still is."

After college, Griffin had a string of jobs working in a bike shop, teaching scuba diving, and assembling operating room equipment. The jobs supported his young family, but his heart remained in plants.

While Griffin's three rambunctious little boys and big dog played in the neighborhood park, Griffin filled every inch of the family's tiny backyard with makeshift nursery benches, crammed full of collections. Even two-by-four horizontal wood fence rails were lined with seedlings from his crosses. Tiny sprouts grew in the curved bottoms of cut-down, liter-sized soda bottles. "I would monkey with plants, hybridizing them between trips into the field," Griffin says. Some of his early successes include the well-known *Aloe* 'Pink Blush' and *Aloe* 'Grassy Lassie'.

### GATHERING FIELD DATA

Griffin's love of fieldwork started in childhood, when his father worked for United Airlines. Wherever the family traveled, Griffin sought out plants, collected seeds, and visited botanic gardens.

As he got older, Griffin traveled farther and to more remote locations. Eventually,



On a dive trip many years ago to Mexico's Coronado Islands, Kelly Griffin encountered massive colonies of *Dudleya candida* growing in the wild, sparking his fascination with the genus, its varied morphology, habitats, and growing requirements.

he traveled with well-known plant explorers such as Brian Kemble, succulent expert and curator at the Ruth Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek, California, and cactus expert Wendell "Woody" Minnich, who had mentored Griffin since Griffin was a teenager. "They were the impetus to up my game and my knowledge," Griffin says. Under their influence, he cultivated a voracious appetite to see plants in the wild, to observe their differences and nuances, to understand how they grow and under what conditions.

Griffin recalls teaching a dive class off Baja Mexico's Coronado Islands in the 1980s. He glanced up at a hillside and caught a glimpse of a ghostly white succulent called *Dudleya candida*. After the dive, he put his camera in a drybox and swam to the island in search of what turned out to be a spectacular colony of plants; single plants had close to a hundred rosettes, which, together, measured

five feet across. Each rosette was festooned with long stalks of yellow flowers. It was Griffin's first experience seeing *Dudleya* in a natural habitat and he was hooked.

After that, Griffin searched out *Dudleya* species from coastal Baja to northern California's Sierra Nevada range. He wrote about his observations for the *Cactus and Succulent Journal* in 2004. In the articles, Griffin gently promotes cultivation of *Dudleya* species as he compares their habitats, their morphologies, and speculates on growing requirements. Last fall, Griffin returned to the Coronados to update those original observations.

After each trip, Griffin organizes his photos and notes. He uses them, in part, for talks to cactus and succulent societies. Around 2002, nurseryman Jerry Hunter, owner of Rancho Soledad Nursery in Rancho Santa Fe, California, approached Griffin following a talk. Before you go on your next trip, Hunter told him, come

talk to me. When Griffin did, Hunter said he believed in what Griffin was doing and wanted to support his trip. How much did he need? "Jerry gave me twice the amount I asked for," Griffin recalls. Upon his return, Griffin shared his observations with Hunter, who was so impressed, he offered Griffin a job.

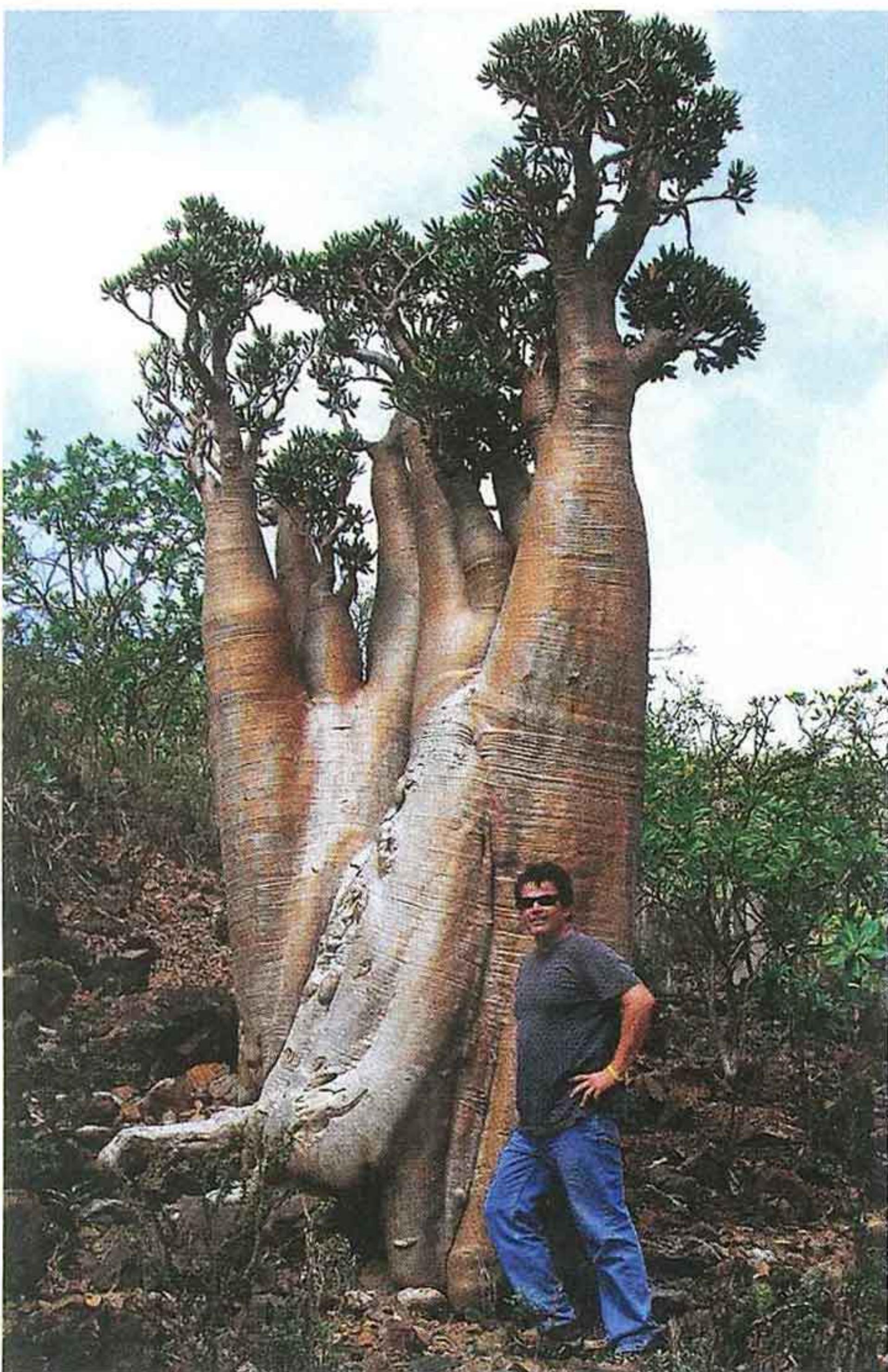
For a decade, Griffin researched, hybridized, and developed new plants at Rancho Soledad. He also continued his travels in search of rare and unusual succulents in places such as Mexico, Cuba, South Africa, Australia, Bolivia, Peru, Madagascar, Chile, and Yemen.

## CONSCIENTIOUS COLLECTION

Wherever he visits, Griffin adheres to a strict collecting ethic. His goal is to document plants, particularly those that are little known. "The point is to record and get better knowledge about plants in the wild," he says, "because when plants aren't

known—and aren't protected—they are at risk of being destroyed."

Collecting has its risks, depending on the methodology. Griffin disdains collectors who see dollar signs on a hillside of rare plants rather than seeing how important those plants are for their environment, for local animals, and for the beauty of the natural habitat. "One guy collects two or three plants," he says, "then the next guy comes and does the same thing, and soon there's nothing left."



Kelly Griffin poses next to an enormous *Adenium socotranum* on the island of Socotra.

Griffin explains that he collects seeds so as not to disrupt populations. "In a stable population of plants," he says, "for every plant that lives out its life, one replaces it. If you take that one plant, it's gone, and it makes no seed in the wild ever again. If instead you take 10 or 20 seeds, the plant makes seed again the next year so the population remains stable."

On a 2009 trip to Madagascar, for example, Griffin found three previously unknown aloe species. Two species were growing in the garden of his local guide. When Griffin asked to see the plants in the wild, the guide led him on a 30-mile trek along a footpath. Twelve hours later, they arrived at the aloes' habitat. Griffin marked the location on his GPS, then photographed the plants, took copious notes, and only as many seeds as he need-

## A SAMPLING OF GRIFFIN ALOE HYBRIDS

With a few exceptions, aloes require a frost-free climate and sharp drainage for successful outdoor cultivation. But Kelly Griffin says many of the smaller hybrids, including the ones below, are well suited to container culture. "Most will do fine outside on a patio grown in containers with good drainage," he says. In the absence of rain, water once a week in summer. In advance of first frost, containers should be moved to a protected location and watered sparingly over winter. "Ideally a greenhouse is sweet," Griffin says, "but a bright sunny window should suffice. If you keep them under-potted and grow them in bright light, they will obtain the best color."

**'Bright Ember'** Rosettes less than a foot across with bright green blades, pocked with raised yellow spots; orange flowers in winter.

**'Christmas Carol'** Less than a foot across, with rough, deep green leaves with raised red dots; leaf margins edged in red serrations.

**'Delta Lights'** Eighteen-inch-wide rosettes with slightly rough leaves marked in a zigzag pattern of deep and pale green.

**'Grassy Lassie'** Smooth but narrow and upright, bright green leaves to about one foot tall; bright orange flowers above the foliage much of the year.

**'Lavender Star'** Tiny rosettes, only six inches tall and a foot across with deep green blades pocked with pale green markings and edged in soft red teeth; orange winter flowers.

**'Moondance'** Smooth, deep green blades heavily marked with icy, pale green.

**'Peppermint'** Clustering rosettes with peppermint green blades marked with pale green dashes and bright orange-red, toothed margins; orange flowers in winter.

**'Pink Blush'** Rosette is only a foot tall and wide with rough, deep green pocked leaves with light green dashes and slight orange blush margins; orange flowers in winter and spring.

**'Starfire'** Tiny rosettes, one-half to a foot tall, that look like rough-surfaced starfish; blades are very light green with golden markings; orange winter flowers.

**'Sunrise'** Clumping aloe with individual rosettes less than a foot tall; gray-green leaves with raised, coral to yellow dashes; orange-red flowers in winter.

**'Sunset'** Rosettes a foot or less across with ice green/lavender blush blades edged in bright red teeth and with the occasional raised red "bump" on the blade; orange flowers in winter.

**'Viper'** Clusters of tiny rosettes, a foot across or smaller; bright green blades with orange-red raised markings and toothed edges; orange flowers in winter.



'Christmas Carol'

ed. The offspring of those seeds are now part of Griffin's breeding program.

Such remote and hard-to-access areas are typical of Griffin's explorations. In Socotra, a tiny archipelago off the coast of Yemen, Griffin had a memorable encounter with a giant *Adenium*. Socotra is designated by UNESCO as a world heri-

tage site, based in part on its unique flora. Griffin and the colleagues he traveled with hired local Socotran guides. Their truck blew a tire, and as the guides fixed it, "Everyone went up a hill," Griffin recalls. "I turned and noticed something across the valley and got out my field glasses. I thought, 'What the heck is that?'"

## Sources

**Almost Eden Plants**, Merryville, LA.  
(337) 375-2114.  
[www.almostedenplants.com](http://www.almostedenplants.com).

**Plant Delights Nursery, Inc**, Raleigh,  
NC. (919) 772-4794.  
[www.plantdelights.com](http://www.plantdelights.com).

**Shoal Creek Succulents**, Elgin, IL.  
(847) 450-7525.  
[www.shoalcreek.com](http://www.shoalcreek.com).

**Yucca Do Nursery**, Giddings, TX.  
(979) 542-8511.  
[www.yuccado.com](http://www.yuccado.com).

## Resources

**Cactus and Succulent Society of America**, Claremont, California.  
(626) 853-8005. [www.cssainc.org](http://www.cssainc.org).

**Garden Succulents Primer** by Gideon Smith and Ben-Erik Van Wyk. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2008.

**The Timber Press Guide to Succulent Plants of the World** by Fred Dortort. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2011.

Griffin set off down the road and across the river, where he found a giant desert rose (*Adenium* spp.). Desert roses are caudiciforms or “fat plants,” which have swollen trunks used for water storage. “It was the biggest one we’d seen,” he says. Griffin wedged his camera between rocks, aimed, and set the timer so he could photograph himself standing next to the *Adenium*. He got three shots before the truck’s horn beckoned him back. “I ran down the road and told everyone about the giant *Adenium* and said they really should see it.” No thanks, they’d seen plenty, they told him. Later, when Griffin shared his photos, his colleagues were amazed to see him dwarfed by a trunk at least 20 feet tall and eight feet wide.

## SUCCULENT SHOWCASE

For the last decade, until his recent departure, Griffin planted his discoveries and hybrids on the hillsides of Rancho Soledad Nursery. Kelaidis refers to those hillsides as “a showcase for one of the greatest nurseries of the world.”

Tony Avent, owner and proprietor of the Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina, remembers his first visit to Ran-



For a decade, Griffin worked at Rancho Soledad Nursery near San Diego, landscaping the nursery's hillsides with plants grown from seeds he collected on travels around the world.

cho Soledad. “I was wandering through the nursery, seeing incredible agaves and yuccas that no one grows. I saw some of the rarest agaves I’d ever seen; I’m thinking this is not a normal nursery, someone here is a plant geek,” says Avent, who then asked who was behind the collection. “They said ‘That’s Kelly’s’. He is a crazy plant nerd.” It’s a title Griffin wears proudly.

Leaving Rancho Soledad Nursery was not easy for Griffin, who thinks of its owner, Jerry Hunter, as a father figure. “Jerry is an incredible plantsman,” Griffin says. “So much of what I know

is thanks to Jerry. He’s given me a lot of opportunities.”

## HYBRID HOMEWORK

At his own nursery, Xeric Growers, Griffin and business partner Allen Repashy are growing their operation one greenhouse and shade house at a time. Nursery benches are filled with odd and unusual aloes, agaves, echeverias, and more. Some of the stock awaits manipulation in Xeric’s tissue culture lab; other plants are the products of tissue culture or traditional hybridization done by Griffin and his associates.

In the tissue culture lab, Griffin sits at a stainless steel laboratory hood. His rough fingers hold a sharp scalpel in one hand. Forceps in his other hand hold a pale green, striated aloe, barely two inches tall. Griffin handles the aloe as delicately as if it were a newborn. In a sense, the aloe is a newborn, newly borne from a single cell that gave rise to an entire plant through the magic of tissue culture.

Griffin carefully scrapes away dead cells at the base of the aloe, preparing it for a container of rooting hormone, the next step along its journey to becoming

flowers, and then better flower colors, then for flowering year round. I can never stop. It's like home improvement: You think you are all done when you get the kitchen finished, and then you have to start on the bedroom."

The home improvement analogy is especially apt since much of Griffin's personal hybridizing is done with his home collection. Many a night, his dining room table is covered with notebooks, flowers, a vial or two of frozen pollen, paintbrushes, dental floss, and a flashlight.

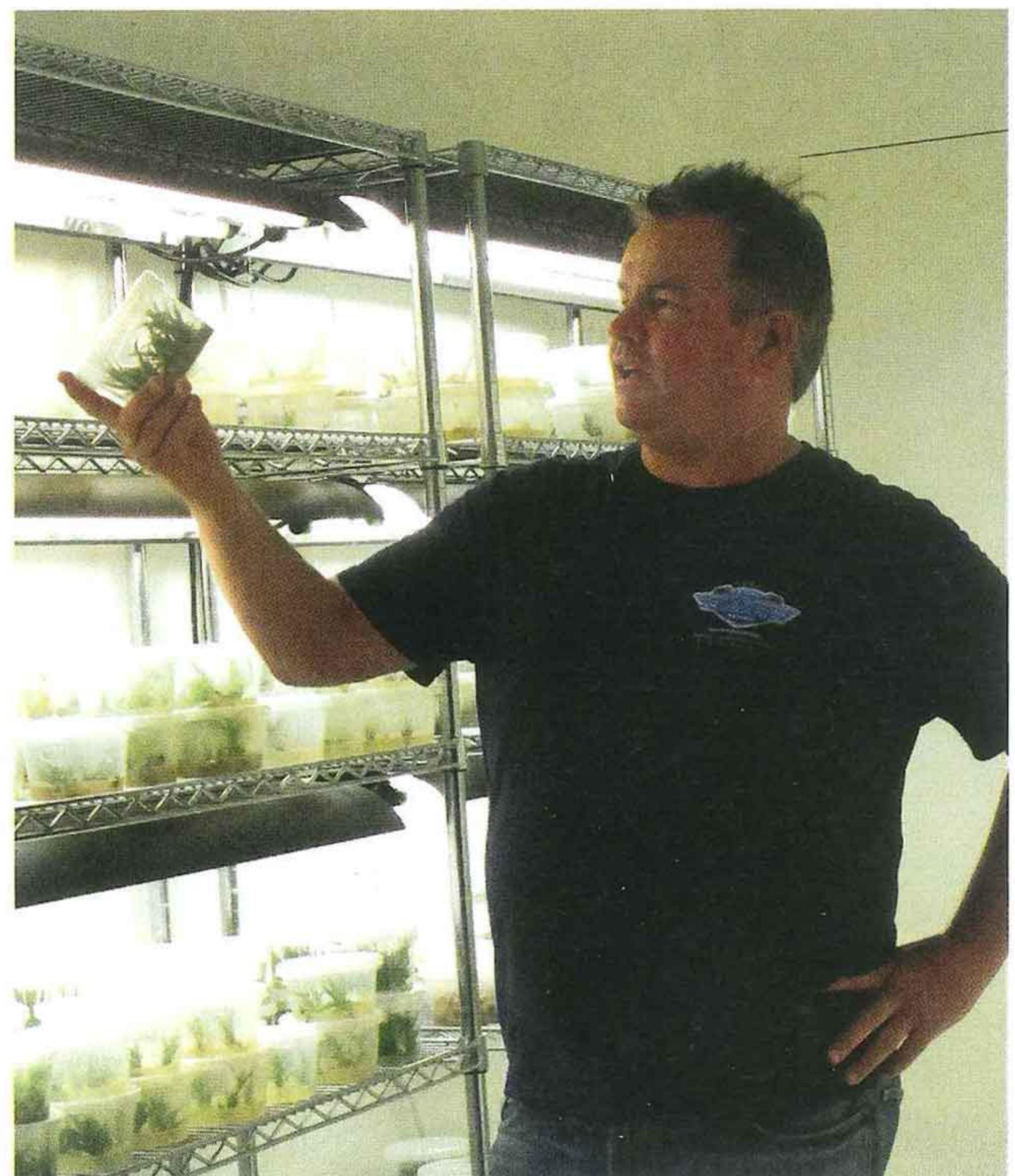
is what Griffin did for Rancho Soledad, what he does for Xeric Growers, and what he will do for Altman Plants.

Altman Plants pursued Griffin for his years of success breeding succulents, according to president Ken Altman. "Kelly is such an enthusiastic person, almost an evangelist for succulents. To have his kind of expertise in our company is a great thing. He is going to have a fun time here. We have a lot of plants for Kelly to play with."

Griffin uses his knowledge and the opportunities that have presented themselves well, says Kelaidis. "Kelly is a good



**Above:** In the tissue culture lab at Xeric Growers, Griffin can clone hundreds of new plants like this young *Aloe* hybrid from tiny pieces of the growing shoot from the mother plant. **Right:** Griffin checks on plants in the tissue culture lab. Once plants are placed on hormone medium, they continue their development under controlled light conditions.



fully rooted and ready to plant in some lucky person's garden.

Much like the pioneer hybridizer Luther Burbank, Griffin's brain is constantly cranking. He wakes up in the middle of the night thinking about plants to cross, maybe freezing the pollen from a winter-blooming aloe to cross months later with a summer-blooming aloe, or how to make another type of variegated agave or a better-blooming echeveria. "The possibilities," he says, "are endless."

So, for example, Griffin is revisiting his small, rough aloe hybrids that fill succulent color bowls from Maine to Modesto. "I'm working on getting to large garden sizes," he says, "and once that's done, I want to breed for better

Griffin makes notes about the evening's crosses before extracting pollen from saved stamens and heading into the garden. He finds the ideal bloom, then uses the paintbrush to gently dust the pollen onto the flower's pistil. After pollinating the flower, he ties a length of dental floss around its pedicel, next to the flower's ovary. The floss remains in place as a marker while the seeds develop in the ovary. Once the seeds ripen, Griffin collects them, sows them into pots or flats, eventually selecting the best of the seedlings from each cross.

#### THE NEXT STEP

Successful hybridizers are extremely patient people. It can take 10 years to develop a hybrid and bring it to market, which

leader, innovator, and businessman. He is a game changer. He's rewriting the profession." And while the sheer variety of aloes, agaves, hybrids, and crosses that Griffin has collected or bred is staggering, he talks about his work as if it were the most everyday thing in the world. Griffin loves what he does, and there is no mistaking it; it oozes through his pores, it is what he was born to do; and he does it very, very well.

*Garden writer and designer Nan Sterman is author of California Gardener's Guide Vol. II and Water-Wise Plants for the Southwest. Her collection of low-water plants—including some of Kelly Griffin's aloes—overfills her garden in Encinitas, California.*