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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. "People 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 Hesslar 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 Hesslar.

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.

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