



# OLEANDER HAUS

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## THE LONG WAY HOME

### THE LONG WAY HOME

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IOS Life Member

This is the story of how the Harriet Newding oleander, thought lost in the 2008 hurricane that devastated Galveston Island where it originated, made its way home.

But first a little background. The Harriet Newding oleander is a plant chimera that was discovered amongst a row of oleanders that rimmed my Mom's corner house lot, on Driftwood Lane in Galveston, some 20 years ago. In the simplest terms, a plant chimera begins as a spontaneous genetic mutation, which occurs during normal cell division, in a portion of an otherwise normal plant. The result is a single plant then may have tissues with multiple, slightly altered, genetic codes. The Harriet Newding oleander was isolated from a volunteer seedling that was a triple chimera. The majority of blooms produced by the mother plant were the red-striped, parchment white flowers of the named variety. However some branches produced solid white, and occasionally solid red flowers; leaf and flower morphology remained the same. It took three years to isolate the genetically stable Harriet Newding tissue from the mother plant.

In the early 1990's, rooted cuttings were planted along an entire city block of the island's University of Texas Medical Branch complex. Hurricane Ike in 2008 inundated that end of the island with eight feet of salt water. The medical branch suffered in excess of \$500,000,000 in damage, and 80% of the homes on the island were flooded and left unlivable for up to several years. The salt killed the majority of shrubs and trees on the island, including many hundreds of beautiful live oaks that were planted following the

devastating (pre seawall) hurricane of 1900, in which more than 6,000 residents perished. All the Harriet Newding oleanders, including mine in pots, were casualties of this latest tempest.

Fortunately, over the years various oleander enthusiasts have visited this island and collected cuttings of uniquely Galveston oleanders. To my complete surprise, the Harriet Newding oleander made its way to, and has become popular in Europe.

I believe Oliver Filippi first took cuttings to the South of France, from whence the variety spread. Today I understand this oleander can be purchased from nurseries in France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Holland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and on eBay. My brother, who lives in Germany, got one from a nursery in Bavaria.

Several months ago, I got an e-mail from IOS member, Jim Nicholas, of Rocky Hill, Connecticut. Jim had visited my garden a number of years ago, which frankly I had forgotten. The message expressed concern for the loss of the Harriet Newding oleander on the island, and that however he had five rooted plants, and wanted to know when and where to send them. I had told only Betty Head of the IOS that the oleander named after my mother was lost. Apparently Jim found out and sent out a request for anyone to supply cuttings.

The path these plants took back to Galveston is amazing. Mariann Hámori sent three Harriet Newding oleanders to Jim from Hungary. Mariann recently published a major volume on principally European oleanders (but including many Galveston varieties). Her original plants came from Oliver Filippi in France.

Durell Nelson of Nauvoo, Illinois, sent the remaining Harriet Newding oleanders from his extensive private collection. In an e-mail, Durell tells me that he became interested in oleanders as a young man living in Utah. Several families in his town kept a large tub or two of the plants that wintered in basements. When he lived in Switzerland, Durell observed oleanders that were kept as summer blooming tub plants, and was encouraged to do the same. His original Harriet Newding oleanders came from Nathan Viengkham of Vancouver, Washington.

The last leg of this circuitous route home occurred early this year (2013). I was delayed at my “summer” home in mid-coast Maine. The 2,060-mile drive back to Galveston (with my three Labrador Retrievers) took me within minutes of Jim Nicholas’s home, so we agreed to meet. On a January afternoon, with snow pack on the ground, and in sub-freezing temperatures, Jim handed me a box with five healthy, dark green Harriet Newding oleanders.

The plants now are happily back in subtropical Galveston, just a few feet from where they originated. One will remain here on the property, and another placed in the IOS Oleander Garden. My sincere thanks to everyone whose hands sent the Harriet Newding Oleander on its long way home.

Mai 13th, 2013





A 'Harriet Newding' in Bob's garden (actually the garden of Harriet's house, across the street from Bob's house!)

Another 'Harriet Newding' . . .



. . . growing by Trinity Episkopal Church . . .

. . . in front of the memorial markers for Bob's parents.

