

The History of KEWPIE



Nerium Oleander “KEWPIE”

‘Kewpie’ is one of the most beautiful and extraordinary oleanders. This also has to do with the fact that the ‘Kewpie’ oleander is closely connected with the founder of the International Oleander Society – Maureen ‘Kewpie’ Elizabeth Schwerdtfeger Gaido. In addition, it is still considered a rarity and is only seldom encountered in Europe or the United States. Oleander enthusiasts report that they often try in vain to obtain plants or cuttings.

We would like to document the still-young history of this valuable oleander.

James Nicholas writes about ‘Kewpie’:

“Extraordinarily unusual cultivar; pinwheel-shaped large flowers variegated pink and white, with widely-separated, spiraling petals. Named for Maureen “Kewpie” Gaido, founder of the International Oleander Society. A chance seedling discovered in Galveston by Ethyl Mae Koehler, one of the co-founders of the International Oleander Society. Galveston variety, now becoming very popular in Europe.”

The Handbook on Oleanders, by Richard and Mary Helen Eggenberger (1996), page 44, gives the following information:

" 'Kewpie' – the story of the discovery of the oleander named 'Kewpie' was related to us by Clarence Pleasants and is illustrative of how many superior plants have resulted from chance seedlings. Ethyl Mae Koehler, Kewpie Gaido's close friend, found an unusual plant whose flowers reminded her of Kewpie and after having received permission from the owner, Clarence helped dig it up. The flowers were pink with some blossoms strongly variegated; one branch consistently produced flowers that were all variegated. This sport was rooted and named in honor of Mrs. Kewpie Gaido. It is a large pinwheel-shaped flower, variegated pink and white. Plants are free-blooming and half-hardy."



Elizabeth Head, president of the IOS for many years, gave this clarification regarding the 'Kewpie' oleander to James Nicholas in 2013 upon his request: "I know something about the Kewpie and perhaps I have a little more if I search my notes. The Kewpie was found by one of the charter members of the society--Ethyl May Koehler (deceased) who was a great gardener and garden writer. She was the secretary and wrote the first newsletters until she died quite a while ago. I took over from her and have been a member since about 1969 or 70. She found it on the easement in front of a house not too far from her home. It was growing next to (if I remember right) a Mrs. Trueheart (lt. pink, single). She called it Kewpie in honor of Kewpie Gaido (her good friend and co-founder of the Society). Kewpie promptly purchased it from the

owner of the property and moved it to her large garden. Her family owns the very popular Gaido's restaurant here in Galveston, and at that time the large area behind the restaurant (one whole block in size) was her "garden" and she also had a large greenhouse. We used her facilities for our propagation and growing. She had many varieties planted in this area and we could hold a lot of our growing plants. She died in 1995 as did Clarence Pleasants (the other founder of the Society).

Naturally, we propagated a lot of the Kewpie oleander since it was so different. We were told that we would need to propagate about 4 different consecutive propagations to be sure that the variety would be a permanent variety and not revert back to its (?) original form since it did show some plain and some variegated flowers. We always chose the plants that retained the most variations [sic] and so decided after a lot of propagations that it seemed to be permanent.

We have found that some bushes as the years have gone along would have more plain blossoms than others. We always tried to take the one with the most when we grew some new ones. It could well have been a chimera also that caused it to change. I recently collected some seeds from the Kewpie in our garden and it might be interesting to see what grows - if they grow.

Robert Newding (well-known for his discovery of the variegated oleander variety which he named after his mother, 'Harriet Newding') explained that 'Kewpie', like 'Harriet Newding', is a chimera. That is, the plant is by its nature genetically unstable. At any time and on any part of the shrub, even on the same twig, the flowers can appear different than the well-known variegated ones. (Wikipedia: [Chimera](#))

How 'Kewpie' came to Europe:

Probably around the year 2003, a friend of Irmtraud Gotsis traveled to Galveston and brought back to Germany some cuttings of 'Kewpie' which she had obtained from the IOS. She passed some of them on to Mrs. Gotsis, who raised them in her garden in Agrilis, Greece, and propagated them further. From there on, 'Kewpie' spread to Germany, Hungary, and other European countries during the following years via a chain of oleander enthusiasts. W. Hufnagl (the author) received some cuttings from Mrs. Gotsis in 2012. He was able to further propagate them and distribute them himself, and has long since been able to take his own photographs of 'Kewpie'.



In 2015, James Nicholas und Wilhelm Hufnagl (of the Oleander Haus) undertook a journey to Galveston and visited the IOS. As a gift from a guest, and to honor Maureen 'Kewpie' Gaido, W. Hufnagl brought with him two watercolors of the 'Kewpie' oleander by the Austrian artist Sophia Brandtner, which were presented to Kimberly Gaido, the granddaughter of Kewpie Gaido, on the occasion of this celebration.

There is detailed [documentation](#) of this.

The festivities and the presentation were documented in the publication '[Lazy Gardener & Friends](#)'. (See also: Oleander Haus [TV / Presse](#))



May 2, 2017. On the occasion of the 50-year Jubilee of the International Oleander Society, an article about the Society, Kewpie Gaido, and the 'Kewpie' oleander appeared in the 'Daily News, Galveston'.

„Lydia Miller, a member of the International Oleander Society, shows off the blooms of the Kewpie Gaido oleander Tuesday, May 2, 2017, at the Betty Head Oleander Garden Park, 2624 Sealy, in Galveston. The variety is named for Maureen “Kewpie” E. Schwerdtfeger Gaido, who cultivated oleanders and founded the society 50 years ago.“

The Daily News, Galveston /

[Betty Head Oleander Garden Park](#)

In 2018, the '[Lazy Gardener & Friends](#)' again published an article:

". . . by numerous gift presentations, including this beautiful Sophia Brandtner watercolor of the "Kewpie" oleander (named for Kewpie Gaido. -- My 'Kewpie Gaido' oleander was lost in Ike.)"

(See also: Oleander Haus [TV / Presse](#))



In April 2020, a Facebook article of the [International Oleander Society](#) about Maureen Elizabeth Gaido appeared, in which the following is reported regarding the 'Kewpie' oleander:

„ . . Kewpie was made an honorary life member of the International Oleander Society in 1975 and remained passionate about the flower until her death on August 19, 1995. One of the easily identifiable and pretty oleanders bares her name ,The Kewpie Oleander‘. . .“



Even today, in August 2020, 'Kewpie' draws special attention. A Facebook article of the [International Oleander Society](#):

„Our Kewpie Gaido is blooming in the Betty Head Oleander Garden in Galveston. The Oleander Garden is located at 27th and Sealy and is open daily from 10:00 - 4:00. The Garden is a really nice place to get and while being socially distant. Come on out and see our Kewpie Oleander in bloom!“

Oktober 2020, Oleander Haus

Translation: [James Nicholas](#)

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