



# Interiorscape Hall of Fame



## Frank James

### 1997 Plantscaping Professional (Awarded Posthumously)

Frank James was one of the earliest known interiorscapers in California and also one of the first in the United States.

His father started a tropical foliage nursery, E. James Nursery, in 1905 and the young Frank James worked there from his early youth. In 1934, Frank graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in horticulture from the University of California Davis. He then returned to work for his father and regularly loaned plants to schools and service organizations for special functions. In 1935, at the age of 23, Frank James first started to think how he could 'loan' plants and charge for this service.

As this idea developed, Frank started trading under the name Decorative Plant Rentals to rent plants as decorations for stages and special events at a fixed fee by the day or week. His first major rental was in 1947 to Macys Department Store for their legendary Spring Sale and Foliage Show. This transaction received important press coverage and helped launch Frank into the major plant rental business.

In Southern California, Roy Wilcox, of Roy F. Wilcox & Company, and Tom Edwards, of what is now known as Keeline-Wilcox Nursery, caught word of what Frank was doing. They approached him about starting branch operations in major cities around the country, and in late 1949 they started Interior Plant Rentals, which would be the name for their national operations. In May 1950 stock was issued, with 15 shares each to Roy Wilcox and Tom Edwards, and 30 shares to Frank James. Frank's operation continued to grow rapidly throughout the area but, without his hands-on management style and available expertise, other areas never really took off.

In 1952 Frank bought out his partners and continued to operate his company as Decorative Plant Rentals, which he had incorporated in 1949. His operation grew rapidly as he continued to rent plants by the day or week to trade shows, conventions, parties, weddings, banquets, but also by the month or year to offices, hotels, restaurants, airports and anyone who wanted to rent beautiful plants. He became known for his splendid service and expanded into the San Francisco, Sacramento and Hayward areas.

Frank hired his first sales person in 1950 to sell his rental services and in 1954 he dissolved the wholesale nursery business to put all of his energies into his interior rental and maintenance business. In 1958 he hired the first known female sales person in our industry, Faye Lewis.

His pioneering spirit, combined with his love of horticulture, quality service and professionalism, was instrumental in developing the interiorscape business as we know

it today. Frank targeted every conceivable prospect for his plants and opened new markets for interiorscaping through the 1950s and 1960s.

In the early 1950s, John Ashton, an airline pilot who regularly flew from Minneapolis to San Francisco, read an article on Frank James in the Wall Street Journal. With free time on his hands, he decided that this was a perfect business opportunity and decided to do the same in Minneapolis.

He went to see Frank James and, after starting his company, (now known as Brachmans) decided to start a second operation in Milwaukee. However, the individual who was running the business in Milwaukee for John Ashton decided that Chicago would be a much better market than Milwaukee so he left Milwaukee for Chicago in 1964 to pursue his own business dreams.

Once in Chicago, he approached Leider Nurseries, a major grower of potted foliage and flowering plants in the area, to purchase plants and asked to rent some greenhouse space. At first they didn't take him seriously but later reconsidered and agreed. Within a year, the individual disappeared, leaving behind debts and a handful of unhappy customers.

The elder Leider suggested to his young son Gerry, who was studying to become an accountant, that maybe he could take care of these few customers and their rented plants to pay his way through college. Gerry agreed and, upon graduating, realized that he had made more money from his rented plants than the accounting firm of Arthur Anderson was offering him as an accountant.

As the Vietnam war was going on, Gerry knew that he would soon be drafted and so decided to stick with the plant rental and maintenance until his departure. Upon returning in 1970, he was discharged in Oakland and he decided that maybe he should think more seriously about this business and looked up Frank James, about whom he had heard so much. Before going home he went by and was inspired by the fleets of trucks and the neat operation he saw. Two weeks later he returned and spent time then and on future trips learning how Frank James did it.

In fact, this mentoring by Frank James was just one side of this great man. Always ready to give advice and help others he willingly showed others how to get started. Gerry Leider set up Tropical Plant Rentals, which became by far the largest interiorscape business in the world before being bought out by Rentokil in 1988. Many others admired Frank and sought his counsel, including Rick Wilcox in 1971 when he started Wilcox Environmental Interiors in San Diego.

Frank was very active and traveled to the earliest gatherings of interiorscapers around the nation. In fact, when Luwasa first arrived with Hydroculture in the early 1970s, he turned to Gerry Leider and said, "I'm too old for this." Now, years later, Gerry realizes that when Frank ever said this, he really meant that this really wouldn't work or was impractical, but he was too polite to say so when everyone else thought it was a great idea.

Frank also served in various volunteer organizations including being Oakland's Park Commissioner. In the mid 1970s Ed Rathbun, then Vice President of American Building Maintenance Company, had started an exterior and interior landscape division. ABM had struggled with this concept due to a lack of available expertise and Ed, after much research, decided that Decorative Plant Rentals, Inc., which he felt at that time was the only company that was a serious contender, was a great model.

He approached Frank James, who had recently had a stroke, to see if he was interested in selling. Frank was interested but was not willing to commit to a three-year contract to stay on with the company after it was sold, which was an ABM condition. The sale fell through but by that time Ed was so impressed with Frank and his company that he decided to offer to buy it without his commitment, as long as Frank was willing to consult with him and work, as physically able. He purchased the company in 1976. Decorative Plants is now the fifth largest interior landscape company in the United States.

