



Where Horticulture and Aviculture Flourish

By Tom Marshall
Photos by Aaron Bernard

In the northwest corner of the great Commonwealth of Virginia, just off Interstate 81 on Route 11, there is a thriving business situated on 35+ acres known by the public for years as Weber's Nursery, a full service garden center open year around. This is a family business that has been in operation since 1946. When you enter Weber's Garden Center, you do so in a relatively narrow but expansive structure where garden supplies, soil supplements and other paraphernalia necessary for gardening are on display. Taking a few steps beyond the entrance and into the greenhouse section, which is many times larger, your senses are immediately met with a kaleidoscope of color coupled with a cacophony of sound. The colors belong to the hundreds of beautiful plants and hanging baskets; and the sounds, as well as more color, emanate from a dozen or more macaws at the back of this light-filled exotic paradise. The display macaws are maintained in huge aviaries with dimensions of 11 x 11 x 11 and 16 x 10 x 18 feet, which enhance the viewing ambiance created by this exotic environment.



Author with Peter Weber.

The avian chorus members include a number of Hyacinths, a couple of Scarlet Macaws, a duo of siblings of Blue and Golds and a single Buffon's Macaw. I almost missed seeing the smaller Blue-throated Macaws with all the activity, but they were there, holding their own.

There have been parrots at Weber's ever since Peter Weber's grandmother, Michael's mother, bought the first parrot, an African Grey, followed by a pair of Moluccan Cockatoos and several species of Amazons. The cockatoos proved difficult with plenty of broken eggs, but the Amazons seemed a little more prone to breed. Their first success was from a pair of Orange-winged Amazons, however their Double Yellow-headed Amazons laid clear eggs. They do have a very prolific Blue-fronted Amazon pair, currently with three babies in the nest. That particular pair has produced approximately 30 parrots for the pet trade. Peter said that he always preferred the male baby Blue-fronts; as they are the most colorful and inquisitive, while the young hens are a little nasty. In addition to the fertile pair, he still has a group of three older spinster sisters from the pair, who won't win any "Miss Congeniality" titles. That first-hand report seems contrary to what most "experts" say about any, and all Amazons. Both Rosemary Low and Greg Glendell, two authors of books on Amazons, suggest that a female Amazon most likely would make a better pet; and I took their advise when purchasing my hand-fed Blue-fronted Amazon, Lola. However, all parrots are individuals, and don't always live up to their stereotype. On that we can all agree.

Regardless, Michael Weber, the master gardener and successful business man has focused on raising macaws, which make up the bulk of their collection today. Most of these other macaws are off exhibit behind the nursery in a second green house filled with tropical plants and breeding facilities for their macaws. Michael and his wife live in a comfortable home behind the main building and adjacent to the greenhouse aviaries, which allows him to be with his plants and birds, as his passion for horticulture and aviculture remain a constant imperative.

Michael and Peter, who shares his father's enthusiasm for the family business and avocation and who will carry on their legacy,

are proud of their particular success with the Blue-throated Macaws. In the last five to six years, their Blue-throated Macaws have produced 30 to 40 babies; and currently they have 8-9 young pairs set up between two and five years of age.

Oddly enough, his pairs of BTMs did not start to breed until they were about 15 years of age, whereas the similar-sized Red-fronted Macaws bred much earlier. His breeding focus is with these mid-size macaws with a very restricted range in the wilds of Bolivia. They also have bred several other species of macaws.

The Webers have bred over ten baby Scarlet Macaws; and one of those Scarlet Macaw hens is a free-flying bird who has mated with a Harlequin Macaw male. This was not planned, but a Harlequin was part of several birds that they were training to fly free. Peter has made the observation that Scarlet Macaws are a little smarter than some of the other macaws, as they trained quite easily for free flight where as the other macaws often got lost and into trouble. Many had to be rescued from awkward situations before they finally caught on how to be successful as free-flight birds. The mixed pair has made their nest in the top of a retired truck trailer, and the hen is sitting on eggs!

I also learned that Michael Weber had once been a member of AFA, but thought that our position on hybrids was too severe. I explained to him that AFA understands that all birds are worthy of good care; and a hybrid can make a good pet. Sometimes love happens, and two different species will prefer each other over their own kind. The important thing to remember is that any offspring should be reserved for the pet trade and not for serious breeding with conservation in mind. I also hoped to remind the Webers that their family, similar to the mission of AFA, has an unwritten obligation of handing down to the next generation the legacy of protecting and supporting aviculture for the future. Consequently, I offered to pay to renew their membership in AFA, as these long-serving aviculturists are the epitome of whom we seek to recruit as members.

Currently, father and son have Blue and Gold Macaws on eggs, but no recent births; and one pair eats their eggs. They have three babies from a pair of Military Macaws, and two pair of Red-fronted Macaws set up. The Red-fronts have, in the past,



bred regularly; but their nice temperament as youngsters' changes dramatically when reaching breeding age, according to Peter Weber. They have never bred their Hyacinth Macaw pair, in spite of the luxury of having access to inside quarters and an outside flight. Nor have they ever bred Green-winged Macaws. They have a Buffon's male, which is a very handsome bird and a real favorite, and are aggressively active in looking for a hen.



Michael Weber.

I asked them about what they fed their macaws, and was told they get a different fruit and vegetable daily, in addition to ZuPreem's pelleted bird foods; and they always get donated day-old bread as a staple, which they seem to relish. Several weeks before breeding commences, they are given AviAgra fertility supplement, manufactured by Avitech. Their hand-feeding formula is Embrace Plus by ZuPreem.

Like all of us, they have had mixed results and tragedies. They lost two Hyacinth Macaws from zinc poisoning, which was devastating to their confidence in their husbandry procedures; and of course there are infertile eggs, broken eggs and some babies that don't make it. They seem to understand that the more they concentrate on raising macaws, the more they appreciate and learn from the idiosyncrasies of these magnificent birds.

As we all understand, aviculturists have developed a complex mosaic of anecdotal information based primarily on instinct, intuition and simple observation. The art of aviculture continues to evolve and has proven very successful with many species, such as macaws. There is also the growing science of aviculture as it matures into a viable technique for conservation. What is lacking may be the fact that much is lost when an aviculturist does not have a family or colleagues who will carry on this important endeavor of breeding and learning from close association with exotic species threatened in their native habitat, like the Weber Family of Winchester, Virginia.

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