

CHINESE FLOWER GROWERS

by Allen Chan (Copyright 2021)



My parents Russell and Anne Chan.

My father, Russell Chan, was born in San Diego in 1924. My grandparents and their two older sons, Curtis and Fred, had moved from Stockton where my grandfather had been potato farming with 5 other men. One of the men wanted to increase his share of the profits by eliminating two of the partners. My grandfather found employment as a gardener for a family in Coronado and laid low for several years before returning to San Francisco. By then his ex-partner was dying of cancer.

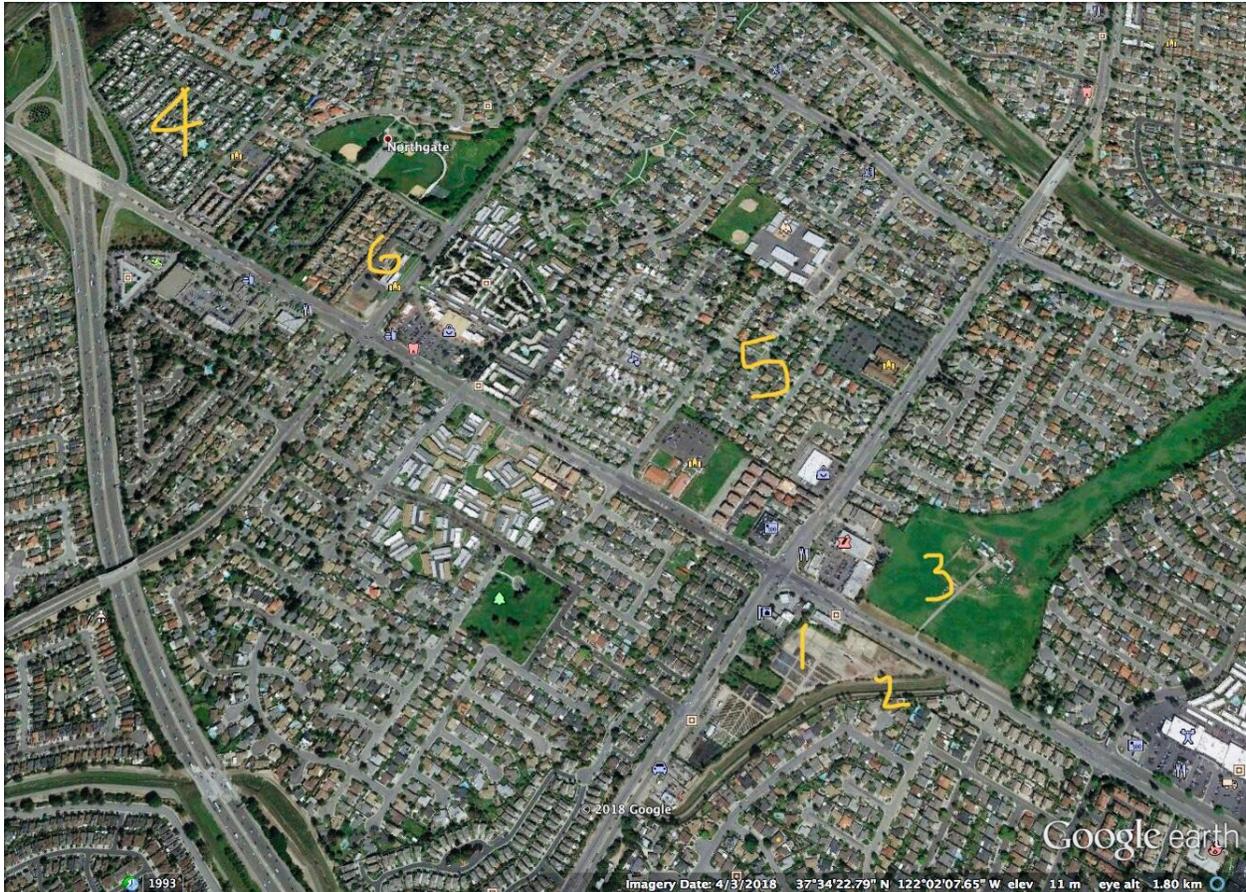
My Aunt Mary was also born in San Diego two years after my father. Shortly after her birth, my grandmother decided to move back to China (Nam San, Dow Moon in the Pearl Delta region of Canton) with the children. As they got

older, the children rejoined their father in the Bay Area for school and to work.

During WWII, my father and his best friend Wai Gor (Brother Wai) worked as welders in the Richmond shipyards. My father had to quit because the smoke was bad for his asthma and he found work as a busboy at Hamilton Air Force Base. My Uncle Curtis was trained as a draftsman in Richmond. After the war Curtis, Russell and Wai got into the aster growing business. Asters need to be rotated annually and the same land cannot be reused for several years. Some Chinese grew chrysanthemums and roses, but those required an initial investment for property and to build green houses. Also because of his asthma, my father couldn't work for prolonged periods in a greenhouse. They started in Santa Clara and later leased land in Mountain View and Menlo Park.

Curtis and Russell both returned to China to find brides and married in the late 1940s. My older brother Steve was born in China in 1949, but my father didn't have the finances to bring the two of them to the US for 8 or 9 years. Around that time Curtis found a drafting job at NASA Ames and Wai Gor a job with Koret of California.

I was born in 1960 and in my first two years, we rented houses in East Palo Alto, Mount Eden (Hayward) and Fremont. In March, 1962, my parents bought a house on Oak Street in the new Fair Oaks Development; we moved in when it was completed in late 1962 or early 1963.

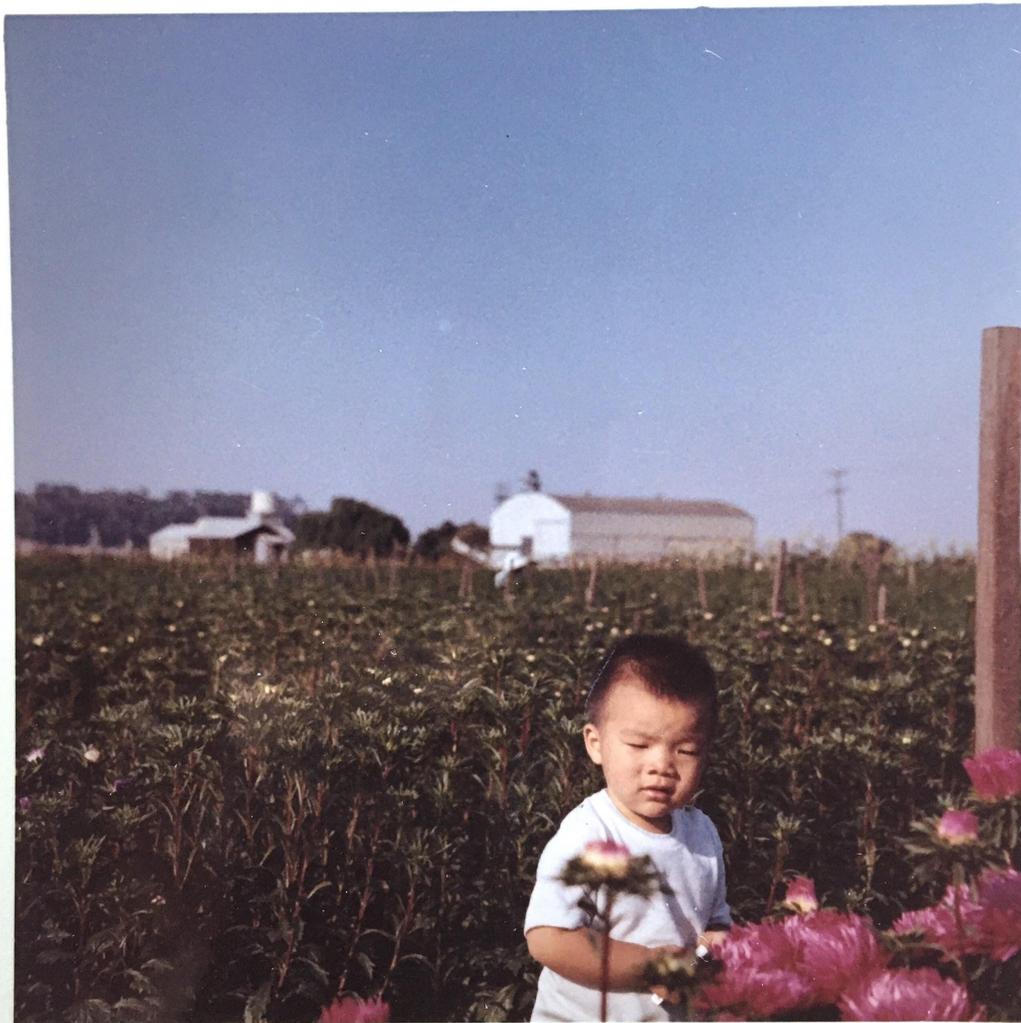


Locations where we grew flowers in the 1960s and 70s in 2018.

When we first moved to Fremont in 1961, we rented a house at 4178 Decoto Road, near the intersection of Fremont Blvd. and Decoto Road. We also leased land next to the house to grow flowers. First on the southern corner where *Regan Nursery* is [Location 1 above] and later on the eastern side of Fremont Blvd. where horse stables are today [3]. In the 1960s, Crandall Creek [2] continued under Fremont Blvd. (over a bridge) to the eastern side and stopped there. There was a footpath under the bridge along the creek. The building at 35041 Fremont Blvd. (K-Pop Cafe in 2018) was a grocery store and we used the underpass to go buy candy and sodas.



Our first house in Fremont. Uncle Curtis, Aunt Sylvia, Aunt Mary and my mother. This house was demolished in 2012.



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Our first aster field in Fremont. The building with the rounded roof is now *Virdee's Foreign Automotive* on Decoto Road, near Cabrillo. The Ardenwood Forest is on the upper left horizon.



From mom and pop store (1960s) to K-Pop Cafe (2010s).

Around 1966, my parents moved to another field at Beard Road and Fremont Blvd [4]. This was north of the old Alviso Elementary School and is now *Fallbrook Terrace*.



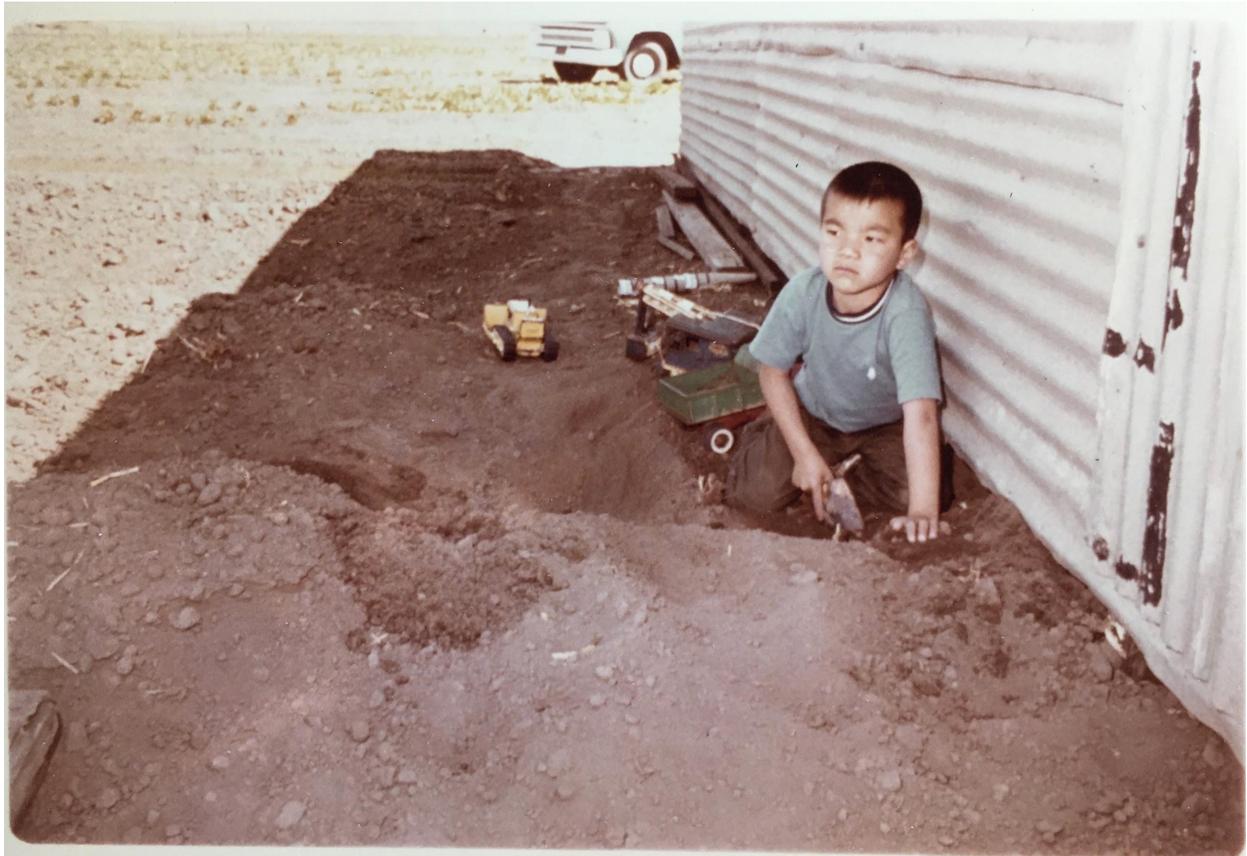
This is the field at Beard Road roughly laid out with flower beds, aisles between the beds to work in and stakes to allow watering hoses to be pulled down each aisle. The water pipe, laid out by my father, runs up from the lower left hand corner. Ferry Lane is on the horizon. The houses in the photo are still there. We see their backs in this photo, but they face the road.

Their final location was on the east side of Ferry Lane [5] around 1970. (There was no west side back then.) The homes that were there then are now surrounded by new tract houses.

My brother Steve was drafted after high school and joined the Marine Corps in 1972. My parents grew flowers for two more years before retiring from floriculture. My father went to work for *Golden Gate Flowers* in San Mateo, the wholesaler that we had sold our flowers to. My mother worked for various Chinatown sewing operations, picking up the yardage and working from home.

When we were growing flowers, we had a shed that we took apart and rebuilt when we changed fields. It was probably about 25 feet square and was framed with two-by-fours. The walls and the roof were made of

corrugated metal sheets. We used it to store tools, supplies and cut flowers. We also took breaks there and cooked inside with a camp stove. Ventilation was not a problem as there was a gap between the walls and roof to keep it cool for the flowers.



The author next to our shed. No wifi available in those days!

One of my cousins, Curtis, Jr., only remembers working in the fields as boring. Being a child during those years, excitement was seeing big trucks drive by on Fremont Blvd. and aircraft, especially military planes, and gliders from the old Skysailing Airport in Warm Springs. We caught insects and lizards; my dad trapped gophers, moles and squirrels.

Both sides of Fremont Blvd. were still mostly farms and orchards. Many of them had their own small stands on the boulevard. A freshly picked cauliflower or cabbage that fell from a truck could go from the street to our kitchen. There was a poultry farm that we sometimes went to on Thornton

Ave. The owner, Marie Silva¹, later sold her property and Fremont's first McDonald's was built there.

My parents would collect watercress from the local creeks and purslane from our fields. They always grew a double row of corn as a windbreak. Relatives came for corn in the late summer.

OTHER GROWERS

The Chin family were chrysanthemum growers in Union City. The Chins were also from Nam San village and we visited them and my parents would sometimes help out in their greenhouses. Their property was across the street from the *Alvarado Plaza Shopping Center* (Alvarado Blvd. and Dyer Street). Their son Peter was about the same age as Steve. He is a UC Berkeley graduate and is retired after a long career with the City of San Francisco.

I met William Young at American High School and learned that his family had also been flower growers. I haven't been able to locate William.

OTHER CONNECTIONS

A frequent visitor to our aster fields was my great uncle. He worked as a cook at a Chinese vegetable farm, which was near where Fremont Blvd. and Paseo Padre Blvd. are today [Location 6]. He worked there from at least the time my parents moved to Fremont to 1970. A picture shared by Jill Fong Au looked familiar and I asked her if she had others. After seeing the photos and talking to her, it turns out that the farm where my great uncle worked was leased from the Fong's!

¹ Owner's name and address was in my father's address book.



The house on the Fong's Centerville property where my great uncle worked.

PHOTO CREDITS

Aerial map - Google Earth, page 3

K-pop Cafe - Allen Chan, page 6

Fong family property - Courtesy Jill Fong Au, page 10

All other photos are from the Chan family collection