



Craig Fritz/The New Mexican

Michael Clark holds his pet macaw, Salsa, at the greenhouse at Jackalope. He is building a new nursery off Old Las Vegas Highway called Tropic of Capricorn, which he hopes to open in the spring.

New nursery close to fruition

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By **CINDY BELLINGER**
For The New Mexican

It's his biggest Christmas present — but the grand opening won't be until spring. That might seem a long way off, but for Michael Clark it signals that the end is finally in sight.

"I started thinking about this in 1993. It's been a long-term project," Clark said. It's also been a risky one. "I'm mortgaged to the hilt. This is a risky time to be growing a new business, but I'm most optimistic."

The new business is Tropic of Capricorn, a 10,000-square-foot nursery on Old Las Vegas Highway. The plans call for a bilevel greenhouse with a courtyard in one of the last remaining commercially zoned areas in an upscale residential

neighborhood. But not to worry — a poll of residents showed hundreds of them overwhelmingly in favor of the new business.

"I feel fortunate. It's easy to get people against a project," Clark said. "It's not so easy to get them to agree to something."

The acceptance probably has a lot to do with Clark's overall vision. He's owned the Greenhouse at Jackalope for nine years, and as one of the founders of the Santa Fe Botanical Garden, Clark is definitely "green." His new nursery, as might be expected, will emphasize environmental consciousness.

To clear the land, Clark removed and sold trees. He didn't cut them down.

He'll be using solar gain on the buildings and gray, or slightly used, water to keep the landscape moist.

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Because water is an issue of great local concern, Clark's plan for Tropic of Capricorn calls for a water-catchment system. In July, he also dug a 300-foot well that will pump 40 gallons a minute, but that water can't be used commercially because of zoning codes.

"We're putting in a 10,000-gallon underground holding tank for fire use," Clark said. "The fire department will be able to hook up to it."

He says he's looking forward to the new focus the nursery will give.

"We're right next to Harry's Roadhouse, and I envision people coming over after Sunday brunch to sit in the tropics awhile," said Clark, who has always been fascinated with the border between the indoors and the outdoors.

The nursery will be divided into several distinct areas: a room for orchids, a room for cacti, a conference room. A large deck in the greenhouse will be just a seating area. A courtyard will hold an array of potted plants. Besides the nursery, eight other garden-related retailers will have products for sale such as garden furniture, wild and exotic bird accessories, dried flowers, indoor/outdoor candles, boulders, fountains and ponds.

Clark estimates that he will have "dozens of employees."

The focus of the nursery is one of refinement. "I'm not a grower. I'm strictly a retailer. I'll be selling aesthetics for the interior of homes and patios," Clark said. "I'll get to pick and choose what I sell. I won't need to push what I grow."

Besides using select New Mexico growers, Clark plans to buy most of his stock from growers in Arizona, California, Florida and Hawaii.

Clark and his wife, Victoria, also ran Victoria's Cacti and Orchids in Sanbusco Center. They closed that store recently to concentrate on their new enterprise. Clark said he's grateful for his wife's support. "Her home is on the line," he said.

Clark started looking for land four years ago and started out with a business partner but bought him out because he wants to be independent. The lot is nearly six acres, and construction started this past fall. The contractor overseeing construction is Justin Young, owner of August Construction.

Young says he met Clark "years ago" when he started buying plants at Jackalope.

"I was a customer first. Now I'm helping him maneuver through all the permits and codes," said Young, who

hopes to start the cement work next month and anticipates completion as planned by the first of May.

"I don't see this as being in competition with any of the other nurseries in town," Young said. "Michael's always had a little different approach. He brings a personal touch to anything he does. He has a good eye for effect and for business."

Clark plans to donate a percentage of every sale to the Santa Fe Botanical Garden.

Initially, Clark only got approval to develop 10 percent of the acreage; but he has the option to expand another 5,000 square feet. "I want to see how things go. I want to retain the rural flavor of the area," Clark said.

He also wants to develop a relationship with students at the New Mexico Academy of Science and Mathematics. The two enterprises almost share a backyard fence. "We're talking about starting a horticulture program," he said.

Clark has worked with plants professionally for 25 years.

"I love challenging that space between the home and outdoors. I want to embellish and play with the garden," he said.

Tropic of Capricorn opens in May.