



Stop by Public Land and you may meet Yuca (dog, left) and Austin McManus (human, right).

PHOTO BY MAXFIELD MORRIS

## Prickly pals

Cacti manage to thrive in some of the planet's most extreme climates. Carving out distinct niches in blazing sunlight, intense heat and consistent drought, they are some of nature's most intrepid survivors—and you can have some of them next to your refrigerator if you want.

That's somewhat thanks to **Austin McManus and Mel Eligon, who own and operate the succulent-heavy retail and gallery space Public Land, which opened in Curtis Park in 2018. It's an uncluttered space, full of natural light and populated largely by spiny plants available for purchase. SN&R spent some time in the store with McManus talking about stories, succulents and Sacramento.**

### Cacti and succulents are really trendy these days.

For sure. I think house plants in general are trendy right now. I think that they're all, like Monstera and fiddle leaf figs, and any kind of plants that are indoor are more popularized right now. ...

I actually have been posting a lot of stuff on Instagram based on the demand actually causing a lot of damage to habitat. Because the demand is so high now that people are poaching. A lot of people are just going out and being like, "I'm just going to take a couple of plants out of the ground in the desert," but that couple people is, like, a lot of people now.

### Are you propagating?

Yeah, we have a couple greenhouses in our backyard, and we propagate in them, but we also source all the way to New Mexico and back. I put a lot of miles on our car. ... Most of the growers we work with have been doing it for 40-plus years. They're mostly in their 70s and 80s. There's rarely any young growers; it's an old guard of growers.

### What's the longest time you've committed to anything in your life?

I think my wife—I've been with her for 10 years. I mean, outside of that, I did work for Juxtapoz for like, 7, 8 years, that was like a type of career in a sense. That was very formative for a lot of

this. ... This [store] is kind of like a culmination of everything. My whole life, I've been really adamant about traveling and spending any money I had to buy plane tickets. Or my wife and I have zig-zagged across the country in our car. I've put a lot of miles on my life already—I've hopped trains many a times, kind of lived a fast life, and so this is kind of where it's all coming underneath one roof.

### What kind of cactus?

Cylindropuntia. ... They've hit me in the joints a few times and the plant material has affected my skin underneath the epidermis, and I had to go to the hospital twice. Cellulitis.

### Is there something about cactuses' character as plants that interests you?

I think most people get interested in them because of their diversity of their forms and shapes, but I ultimately think most of the people who are really into cactus get fascinated with their evolution and their survival techniques and how they've evolved through various climates with little resources. They're kind of like extra terrestrials.

### How has business been?

It's been great. We didn't really announce that we were going to show up, we just kind of popped in here, and I think that people were pretty surprised. ... It's usually pretty busy in here, except for this weather. But it's crazy, we'll have a rainy Sunday and people are still buying tons of cactus. I'm like, that's not how my mind would've ever worked, like, let's go buy some drought tolerant plants that don't need any water in the winter.

### Cactuses are famously pretty sharp. Would you care to respond to that?

... No comment. I feel like on a normal day I would have so many good punch-backs for that one. I would say that more adults touch cactus than kids in here. I would say that my hands are a great representation of not to do that. I've been in the hospital, the ER, twice for cactus. Two infections, both in the joints, in the side of my hands. □

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