

# THOU SHALT NOT BUY

CAROL SIEGEL

**B**UYING AN ORCHID is like falling in love. Your heart races at the sight of the breathtaking beauty, and joy fills your heart as your wallet empties. Your brain goes on sabbatical as your lust-to-possess takes over. Misty-eyed, you buy without thinking. Later, as you escort your mistake to the trash, you have regrets. It is, of course, easier to put an orchid that was a mistake in the garbage than it is to dispose of a beloved, but they are both painful experiences that you want to avoid. You are much more likely to find success with the orchids you buy if you avoid some orchids that are best NOT to buy.

## The Mount Everest Orchid

When asked why they climbed Mt. Everest, the hardy explorers said they did it because it was there. Many of us buy orchids "because they were there." Acting on impulse, we grab up all the blooming orchids we can afford. Eventually, our greenhouse is full of bedraggled orchids we bought when they were in glorious bloom, and we didn't know better. Don't buy an orchid just because you can.

Most of us gather our collection in a haphazard fashion, buying whatever appeals to us at the moment. To maximize your chances for success, a better way would be to look at the plants you are currently growing and see which are doing well under the conditions you are able to provide. Buy those genera that love your benign neglect, your enthusiastic ignorance and your sunny windowsill. If all of your cattleyas shrivel, but your phalaenopsis never stop blooming, think about becoming a specialist in phalaenopsis. Buy other genera, like paphiopedilum, that like similar low-light conditions. Similarly, if plants like *Laelia* from Mexico do really well for you, think about buying more Mexican species and hybrids since your setup seems to mimic the wild growing environment.

Make a wish list of plants you would like to have. Learn about those plants. Find out if these plants will do well in your growing area. Read all about them. If masdevallias like cool temperatures, and your growing area is hot, pick something that enjoys warmer temperatures. Do all the research you can and then make a wish list. Prioritize your wish list. Then, when you see a plant that you really want and can provide a good home for, you will be all ready to make an informed purchase.

## The Teensy-Weensy Baby Orchid

Don't buy a baby plant unless you think it out. Plants in 2-inch pots are sometimes very inexpensive. They are really cute, and you can buy LOTS of smaller plants for the price of just one mature one, but beware. Just as a baby is much harder to take care of than a ten-

year-old, very young orchids are much harder to grow than fully mature plants. Mature plants can roll with the punches you give them and will forgive you your lapses in care more easily.

In addition, most growers are very short on patience, and it may take a seedling up to 11 years to bloom—11 years in which you water, fertilize, repot and wait... and wait. The inexperienced may carefully and tenderly kill the wee plant with zealous care. Most orchids are sold by "pot size" Orchids in a flask or in a 2" pot will probably be much cheaper to buy, but when you add in your time and your expense over the years, it sometimes seems a foolish economy. Some people really enjoy being the nanny to the little seedlings, but if you are like most growers and want instant gratification, buy the biggest orchid you can afford.

## The Hardware Store Orchid

Don't buy all your orchids in the hardware store. I know they are so inexpensive and so pretty and so available, and you are THERE anyway, so why not bring home a Home Depot orchid along with the wallboard! Many of us do, and some of us live to regret it!

While some hardware stores give their orchids tender care, most are really not orchid experts. Your poor orphan orchid may have been sitting on a dock somewhere in the heat, plunged into a dark box, left in a storeroom in the back of the store, crowded together with lots of other plants, and really neglected. Pick up the plant with the pretty flowers that has caught your eye. Is the pot really light? A light plant means that this plant has not gotten much water and is really stressed. The last thing an inexperienced grower needs is a stressed plant to take home (and stress even further.) Are all the flowers open? If they are, your flowers may not last very long when you get them home since they may already have been open a long time. I have seen buyers pass up a plant with only ONE open orchid in favor of one that is fully open. Not smart! Are there very few flowers? Remember that plants with lots of buds and flowers are worth more money than plants that only produce a few flowers. Do the leaves look healthy and light green? In a month from now, at most, you will be left with LEAVES not flowers and you want them to be really healthy. Are there any bugs on the plant? If there are, leave them in the store!! Even if you don't see any bugs, quarantine the plant like a third-world immigrant and keep inspecting it to make sure it doesn't have some stowaway bugs to infect your collection. If no one is looking, slip the plant out of the pot and look at the roots. You want to see lots of growing white-green roots and no mush. If you are satisfied, enjoy your purchase. Just be careful that the wallboard doesn't crush the flowers!

## The Tagless Orchid

Don't buy orchids without tags. Orchids are supposed to come with tags. Those tags are supposed to say more than "Plant \$19.99". You may not care that your plant has no tag, but eventually you probably will wish you had gotten a tag with your plant. Your tag is like a baby's birth certificate. It will tell you the genus and species or hybrid of your plant. The tag will usually be written in Latin, a dead language that never changes and is uniquely suited as a universal identification system. If you go to a greenhouse in Ecuador, *Sophranitis coccinea* will still be *Sophranitis coccinea*. The tag will often tell you the parents of your orchid if it is a hybrid, sometimes where it is from, and what conditions it likes to grow in. It often informs you of whether your plant is a mericlone (a fairly exact copy cloned from one parent), a division (a physical piece of the mother plant), or a cross of two plants. If you cross one orchid with another, you get a lot of variety in the offspring as you do when you have your own children. Sometimes, an individual will name his particular plant with a cultivar name in single quotes like *Paphiopedilum lowii* 'Carol' to mark a special plant. Special orchids often have some initials with a slash in-between, like AM/AOS, which indicates that the plant has won an award. These plants will be worth more and probably will cost more.

If you want to enter a plant for an award at a later date, you will need to have a tag telling you what plant you have. Without a tag, it is nearly impossible to know what a plant is. When your plant is not in bloom, you will wish you knew what plant you have been watering all year! If your plant does not have a tag, ask the vendor for one. He often knows what the plant is, but has been too busy to put a tag in, or it has fallen out. On that note, always put TWO tags in your plant when you get it home—one at an angle in case one falls out. Always check your pot after you water it to make sure it still has a tag. Then, you can find it on the floor, in the garbage, or on the sink while you still know where it belongs.

## The Jungle-Collected Orchid

It is sometimes tempting to buy an orchid that nobody else has, a rare species that is difficult to get and all the rage. At some time, you may be offered a jungle-collected plant that is not legal. I, myself, have been offered plants like this as a compliment and proof of friendship. Run like hell!! Not only are you contributing to the extinction of orchids, but it could land you in jail!

The latest example of this was the scandal surrounding the discovery of *Phragmipedium kovachii* by Michael Kovach. Magenta, magnificent, and as big as a man's hand, the bloom took his breath away when he spotted it on a roadside stand in Peru. When he brought it to Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, it was hailed as one of the biggest orchid discov-

eries in 100 years. They even named it for him.

Two months later, his greenhouse in Virginia was raided by Federal agents. Selby was fined and had to write a formal apology to *Orchids*, the official publication of the AOS. On November 2, 2004, Michael Kovach was sentenced to two years probation and \$1000 fine for importing an orchid without proper authorization, a violation of CITES regulation. They all should have known better.

People often think that just one or two plants can't hurt. Mr. Kovach only took three orchids, but soon whole stands were wiped out. Dr. Harold Koopowitz, in his brilliant article in *Orchid Digest*, '*Phragmipedium kovachii* in the Wild', says that the first and second populations of *P. kovachii* have been completely and illegally stripped out and have been selling in Europe for \$1000 each!!

Ask the nursery where you buy plants if they grew the plant from flask. Nursery-grown can mean that the plant was ripped from the jungle and THEN grown for a few months in the nursery. You want to try your best to help protect native orchids. Make a commitment to buy only plants that have been grown in nurseries or imported legally. You can be fined as much as \$25,000 per plant for illegal plants. Ask questions and stay out of jail.

## The Fussbudget Orchid

Some orchids are really hard to grow. Others grow easily but are really hard to bloom (great...) Some are so fussy that they just up and die if you just look at them cross-eyed. You want to avoid these plants unless you have money to burn or are a really gifted grower.

How do you know if a plant is really demanding? Ask questions before you buy. When I first started growing, I fell in love with a gorgeous little *Sophranitis coccinea*. It was so expensive that I won't even tell you how much it cost. I took it home, and it started dying as soon as I walked it into the greenhouse. It had a death rattle in no time. I should have asked—and the vendor should have told me—that this plant is very fussy, needs a cooler growing condition and a more experienced grower. Plants like *Paphiopedilum rothschildianum* are really hard to bloom, much more challenging than *Paphiopedilum lowii*. Who knew! Always ask before you buy a plant how hardy it is, how tolerant it is of inexperience, how easy it is to bloom, and how often it blooms.

Ask questions, save money, and avoid the trip to the garbage.

## The Alice in Wonderland Orchid

Some orchids look like they belong on the set of *Alice in Wonderland*. They are too big, too small, too dry, too wet, too something that doesn't fit in your reality. Don't buy an orchid that is a mismatch for your growing area. I love great big gorgeous vandas. I have bought several in fits of ecstasy only to find that they

are just too big to fit under my lights on my cart. There is no way I can give them the high light they like under my setup. I also travel and can't mist and water them every day. They start out as beauties and end up as prunes in my setup. They are an Alice in Wonderland orchid for me. I just should not buy them. They are TOO wrong for me.

Every person and every growing area has its limitations. Don't buy an orchid that needs something you can't give. If your orchids need to fit under a shelf on your windowsill, and you fall in love with a big, tall dendrobium, do yourself and the dendrobium a favor and pass it by. Perhaps a miniature cattleya would have a better chance of survival for you. An orchid is a living thing and should only be "adopted" if you can give it what it needs.

## The Stingy Orchid

Don't buy an orchid without knowing how long its blossoms will last. You shower love, affection, money and care on your orchids. You wait with anticipation for those little buds to open and then, some orchids just bloom for a couple of days and that's it for the year! They are so stingy with their blooming that you feel gyped. What did you do wrong? Why didn't they stay open for longer? Why, why, why?

All orchids have inborn clocks for how long their flowers will last under the very best of circumstances. Some, like *Vanilla flavorans*, last for only a day. Others, like some odontoglossums, can last a month. There are people who are thrilled to have a special orchid like a stanhopea bloom for just a few days. The heavenly fragrance and other-worldly appearance are enough of a reward for them. If you are not one of those people, learn which orchid blooms stay open for a long time and buy those that give you what you want.

If you want a plant that is always in bloom, phalaenopsis is a good choice for you. The little spike takes three months to bloom, giving you a thrill the whole time. Then, the flowers often bloom sequentially for up to three months, after which you can cut off the spike above the first or third node, and the spike may bloom again! Months and months of flowers—now that's MY kind of plant.

Phragmipedium spikes can last for months as well. Each of the sequentially-blooming flowers falls off looking fresh and unwilted, so the plant always looks spiffy. On a mature plant, another spike seems to always be popping up as soon as the old one is spent. This is my favorite flower. Others say it is hard to bloom, but I seem to have lots of them always in bloom.

Paphiopedilum produce flowers that are sometimes so firm and long-lasting that you have to check them to make sure they aren't made out of wax. The sequentially-flowering ones like *Paph. primulinum* or *Paph. lowii* reward you with months of flowers.

Plants like *Galeandra divas* and *Encyclia cochleata* and

*Psychopsis papillio* keep blooming on the same spike even after it looks like the spike is done. Don't cut that spike until you know that it is REALLY done.

There is, of course, something very special about the brief, magnificent flowering of some bulbophyllum, stanhopea, catasetum, and sobralia, but know what you are getting when you buy an ephemeral orchid to avoid disappointment.

## The Jane Mansfield Orchid

Few of us can resist the big show-girl orchids that tantalize with their in-your-face gorgeouslyness. They take up lots of space and not everyone can provide the right environment for these beauties to re-bloom. If you bring home a lot of showy orchids and then never see them re-bloom, resist yet another showgirl and try one of the other of the more than 30,000 species and countless orchid hybrids.

Pleurothallids can be a fun subtribe of orchid to try. These small jewels take up very little room. A whole collection can fit on a table-top and delight you with their exotic blooms, best seen with a magnifying glass. In the space of one grammatophyllum, you can have 100 lepanthes, restrepias or pleurothallids. They require very little light and love to be moist and cool.

Try some of the bulbophyllums. With their quivering lips and trembling petals and weird flowers, they are an exotic world apart and, I find, very easy to grow and flower. Some, like *Bulbophyllum echinolabium*, produce flower after flower. I had 14 flowers bloom over six months on my plant. This plant is extinct in the wild, so growing it may help to preserve the plant on the planet.

Catasetums produce a glorious spectrum of flowers that fit in a small space. They thrive under intermediate to warm temperatures and can thrive in a living room window or under lights. Seedlings flower within two years, often flowering twice a year. One flower can perfume a whole room with its delicious fragrance. Different in that they often produce separate and different male and female flowers, they have a fascinating pollination mechanism that flings pollinia at an insect. Best of all, these plants take a dry rest in the winter—and you can practically ignore them until they thrust forth a new leaf.

Remember that a movie star orchid may not be right for you, but a character actor orchid may be just the thing and much more interesting.

## The Neiman Marcus Orchid

Don't buy an orchid just because it is expensive. Some orchids cost a fortune. Orchids of Los Osos sells its award-winning *Paph. Dollgoldi* for \$10,000 on e-bay. The first plants of *Phragmipedium besseae* went for \$2,500. Rare, unusual, desirable or awarded plants can often cost more than braces for your kid. Should you buy a very expensive plant? The answer is, of course, only if your mate won't find out (just a joke...)

The answer is, it depends. Some things are a must-have, and richer folk will pay for what they want. A breeder may find an expensive division worth the money for the money he can make. A collector may feel that an expensive plant is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. For people who like to win awards, an expensive plant may be so perfect it can win a coveted award.

For most of us, a rare plant sometimes means it is just hard to grow so that there aren't a lot of them. We don't want anything that is HARD to grow. A rare plant may just mean that it is NEW and so is in limited supply. I waited a decade and bought *Phragmipedium besseae* for \$25 instead of \$2500. I enjoyed it just as much. Sometimes, a plant is expensive because it has two or three or four spikes instead of just one. You may be happy to pay \$25 instead of \$250 to have just one spike of magnificent flowers to enjoy. Sometimes, the vendor is just greedy or paid a lot for the plant, and you can shop around and get the same plant for a lot less. You will find that certain vendors are half as expensive as others for pretty much the same thing. Go to shows and comparison shop. You will be surprised.

If you shop with a plan and buy orchids that fit your growing environment and budget, you will have much better success. Of course, if I could just follow my own advice...\*

### About the Author

Carol Siegel, a retired English teacher and medical office manager, has been president and newsletter editor of the Greater Las Vegas Orchid Society for several years. Fascinated by pollination, she has spoken on "The Sex Life of Orchids" all around the country. A native orchid enthusiast, she has written articles on Nevada's native orchids for the Native Orchid Conference Journal and contributed articles to the Orchid Digest and Southern Nevada Home and Garden.

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*Rhyncholaelia glauca*, a watercolor painting by Marcia Whitmore.

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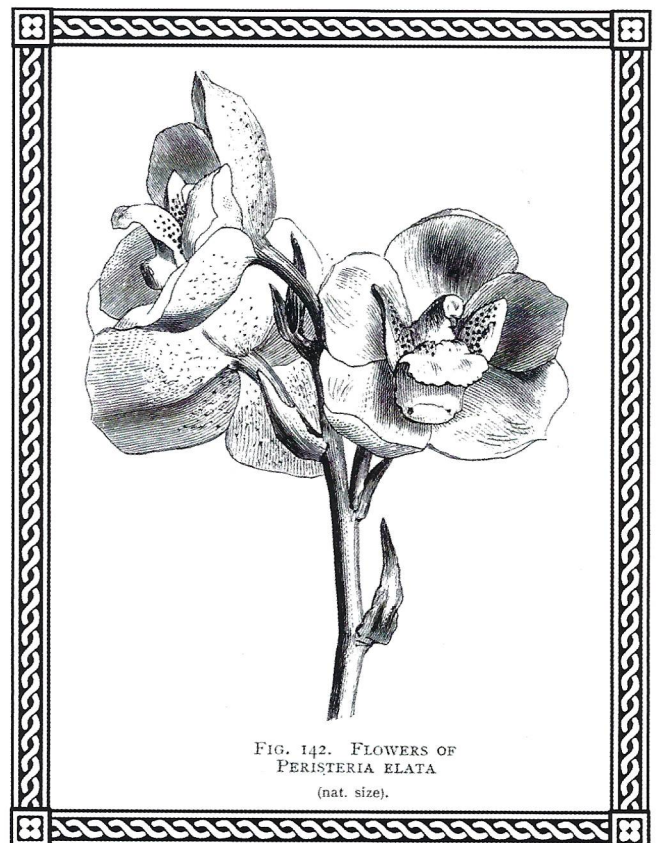


FIG. 142. FLOWERS OF  
*PERISTERIA ELATA*  
(nat. size).

From *Orchids: their Culture and Management*  
by W. Watson (Curator, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)  
published in 1903.