

PLANNING AND DEVELOPING YOUR ORCHID COLLECTION

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LET US BEGIN THIS DISCUSSION with perfect honesty. Growing orchids is not a hobby. It is an addiction. An obsession so great, so profound that the afflicted person may abandon his family, spend his last dime and literally give his life for the sake of one plant! In truth, there should be a twelve-step program for orchid growers, but few will take the first step by admitting they have a problem.

All joking aside, growing orchids can be an expensive, time consuming hobby. However much we may be willing to overlook the cost in order to share our lives with these magnificent plants, practical considerations must have a place, if only to assure that we are able to devote the time, energy and monetary resources to grow our plants to their full potential. In tough economic times, these considerations may have a great deal of importance. Even if we make the decision to suspend new plants purchases, we still must continue to care for the plants we currently have and that cost must be considered.

In this article, I hope to present some practical ideas that will offer solutions to some of the common problems encountered with orchid collections of all sizes and scope. We will begin with the introduction of some basic practical considerations that are often overlooked. From there, some philosophical considerations about planning the collection and giving it direction will be presented. When collections are planned and developed with a sense of direction and purpose, they provide much more overall satisfaction and success. My ideas are not really original. I developed the kernel of the concept by accident as I progressed as a hobbyist and these ideas were refined by reading *The Specialist Orchid Grower* by J. N. Rentoul (Timber Press, 1987). Mr. Rentoul's common sense, straightforward concepts of culture, conditions and acquisition of plants helped me tremendously at the mid-point of my orchid growing adventure. The concepts he presented helped me to reassess my collection and make important decisions in its future direction and purpose.

Practical Considerations

These are the things no one wants to think about, the "do we have to's" that must be answered. But if we want to be the best we can be, yes we have to. Besides, this allows us to say that we can afford that special plant or we really do have the room to add a shade house next to the garage.

Time is the one constant that truly rules over us. It is the one thing we cannot ignore. There are only so many hours in a day and those hours must be divided up amongst the various activities of our lives. Even

though orchids require less actual hands-on time than many other plants and thrive on "observant negligence," they still need a degree of daily time to reach their maximum potential. The collection will require some amount of time on a daily or every other day basis and some extended periods of time on the weekend or other free days. The grower must be honest about the amount of time that can be given to the plants. Time needs to be allotted daily to observe the plants, looking for insects and diseases, staking growths and flower stems, and misting and watering. Weekends and days off will need to include time to carry out full watering, repotting, and other duties that can't be managed in the daily allotment. Don't skimp on the time you spend on these activities. You will find that something always arises that takes more time than you anticipated. It is also helpful with family dynamics if you maximize time estimates. If you tell the family you plan to finish at 3:00 and you finish at 2:30, then you are the hero, not the problem! That is a nice place to be.

Carefully evaluate your growing conditions and locations. Be honest about these limitations. If you have only one good window to use, then you have to plan with those limitations in mind. Growing orchids outdoors in suitable climates can bring wonderful results and be very rewarding, but you must be rigorous in your choices at first. Until you get some solid experience within all the possible micro-climates of your growing location, stay with the genera that are proven in your area. If you have a large greenhouse or multiple growing areas, then the variety of plants you can grow can obviously be expanded.

Understanding your growing conditions and the limitations imposed by them will help you select orchids that will perform well for you. Success will encourage you to learn more and to become a better grower. This will lead to more discoveries about what can be accomplished under your conditions. Many hobbyists have found that great things can be done with what first appears to be very inadequate, limiting conditions.

Money is something that no one likes to talk about but must be discussed. Honest evaluation of the true cost of growing orchids needs to be made and most of us are really afraid to do it. It goes beyond the price of the plant and needs to include several important factors: the cost of pots, potting mixes, fertilizers, insecticides, environmental control (heating, cooling, humidification, and ventilation), greenhouse/structure construction and ongoing maintenance. This list doesn't include everything, but you get the idea. Having this information at hand is helpful when you evaluate your

orchid collection and decide on its direction and future. You may realize you actually have the resources to expand your collection. Of course, you may just as easily realize the opposite, but we are all optimists at heart!

Creating Horticultural Direction and Purpose (The Fun Stuff)

Now we get to do the fun stuff. Having dealt with the hard stuff, let's talk about the plants and flowers. There is an inherent problem with the *Orchidaceae*; it's HUGE! No matter how vast your resources, it is impossible to grow all of them. Over the years, certain groups of orchids, especially tropical epiphytes, have risen to prominence and have remained at the forefront of the hobby. Others have arisen and fallen away, only to be resurrected after awhile.

Some individual orchid collections seem to change monthly, swinging on the whims of their owners and the most recent orchid show or sale. Others never seem to change at all, but plod along producing the same flowers, year after year, growing in number only by necessity of dividing the mother plants. Neither truly provides the greatest degree of satisfaction for most growers. In the first example, a lack of focus on long term goals and an overdeveloped desire to have the newest thing never allows the grower to focus on a firm set of cultural parameters for a dominant group or groups of orchids. This prevents the development of cultural talents to their fullest. In the latter case, the hobbyist starts out well and finds a group of plants that are congenial with his prevailing conditions and tastes. Early successes and refining of cultural practices over time allows the plants to grow well and the owner finds his space full of nice divisions of a few types of plants. Often this person needs to branch out into other genera but doesn't know how to look further. I have a few suggestions that help both situations, and if applied by the beginner, will hopefully help form a collection that will be satisfying from the beginning and lead to greater satisfaction as time passes.

I admit that I had it easy. I developed my interest in orchids before I ever had a plant. I fell in love with orchids through a cut cattleya flower in my mother's flower shop. It would be two years before I actually held a cattleya plant. Between the two steps, I read every word, looked at every picture and searched every card catalog, periodical index and reference tool in the Lea County, NM, schools and public library systems. Along the way, I discovered two local women who grew orchids and one of them loaned me *AOS Bulletins* and catalogs from Fred A. Stewart Orchids, Jones & Scully and Rod McLellen. I found a lot more information than one might expect and pretty soon I knew that I loved cattleyas, vandas and botanicals, and didn't really understand why anyone liked "cyps." I was all of 12 years old. My first plants were purchased from the Fennell Orchid Company in Homestead Florida, when

I was 13. The first orchid I ever brought into flower was a phalaenopsis hybrid. Over the years, I had a lot of opportunities to study orchids and their culture. I also had a lot of opportunities to understand the growing conditions in my part of the world. I have spent all of my life in the western United States with the last 34 years focused in the greater metropolitan Los Angeles area. So, when I became an adult with a real job and some disposable income, I knew exactly what plants I wanted and how I might grow them under my conditions. Most people are not so fortunate. But they can apply the same tools I used with forethought rather than by accident.

I strongly encourage you to read everything you can get your hands on about orchids in general. When I was a kid, the public library system was the most advanced and largest data base I could access. It served me very well. Kind and generous neighbors were equally helpful. In addition to these, now we have the internet and its enormous resources. Use them but use them carefully and wisely. Remember that few internet sites are actually subject to factual scrutiny or peer review. At least the books I read had the advantage of an editor, but not with the great WWW! Caveats taken, the internet is the greatest single reference tool available and you should use it often.

The first step is to identify your interests. What orchids do you find attractive? What plants do you immediately look for in a show or sales display? What plants do you Google? Now, go a bit deeper and pick the plants that really hold your interest, the ones you find yourself going back to again and again. These are the plants you should focus on first. In my experience, everyone that has some success with orchids for very long will find a group of plants that really "gets them"! When you find that group, start researching everything, find out as much as you can and evaluate the information to see if that group is a good candidate for your growing conditions. You may find yourself drawn to many different groups of orchids, but try to limit your focus to a maximum of three groups at first. Heaven help you if you fall head over heels for bulbophyllums, dendrobiums AND pleurothallids!

Once you identify a group or two of orchids to which you are drawn and have learned their cultural needs, begin to acquire your plants. Go slowly at first and buy only a few. Work with this group of plants for at least six months, preferably a year, before buying too many more. You need time to decide if your cultural regime is working and time to make some adjustments that will be needed. This also allows you to discover exactly how much time the plants need for their maintenance. You may find it helpful to keep a notebook of the time you spend with your plants and how they respond to your culture. These notes will help you to adjust your culture and to understand the natural rhythms of your growing area.

Naturally, everyone wants more plants, especially if the current plants are doing well. Now comes the next

As Time Goes By...

step: planned purchasing. When you have found the groups of orchids you want to grow, start planning and making your purchases with your goals in mind. First you must find the plants. Search the internet, visit shows and sales and talk with friends to find the best sources for the plants you're interested in buying. If you want a good collection of species and hybrids of a particular group, begin by purchasing some of the most influential species in the hybrid swarm, some older awarded clones and a few new hybrids in the group. If you want to specialize in Central American species, select two or three genera and purchase the most widely available and easily grown species. As your skills grow, purchase more demanding species.

You can add to your collection in many different ways. Earlier in the 20th century, many hobbyists bought seedlings of new hybrids or selected species in groups of five or ten, hoping to get a "keeper" out of the group. They kept the best ones and donated or sold the others. This is still a very good way to acquire fine hybrids and species, but it is time consuming and takes a good amount of space. If you are a true collector and want the chance to own the best (or the original) then purchasing multiple seedlings from proven parents is the best way to go.

Many people buy meristems of awarded or high quality plants. This is a very good way of obtaining these plants without having to grow them yourself. In fact, this seems to be the business model of the modern pot plant industry. The best individual plants from a grex are selected and cloned for the market. Plants that don't make the grade are destroyed and never see the light of commercial sale. While this makes a large number of quality plants available to the market, I can't help but wonder if it stifles creativity and curiosity on the part of hybridizers and growers alike.

Divisions and keikis of fine plants are still the best ways to get fine or awarded plants. This is especially true if you are looking for older hybrid or species clones. For example, it is rather difficult to find *Cattleya* Bow Bells or *C. mossiae* 'Wagneri' from a modern commercial grower. But if you do a little shopping around on the internet, you can probably find divisions for sale. You should know your seller well and the usual precautions should be taken but you'll eventually find what you want.

When you attend orchid shows or sales, don't go unprepared. By this I mean plan your purchases and don't make impulse buys. If you are following a plan and advancing toward particular goals, then don't allow yourself to be drawn off track. Before you go to the show, make a list of plants you would like to buy and then visit the show's website to see which vendors will be there that sell the plants on your list. Admittedly, there will be impulse purchases but try to keep them in line with the rest of your purchases and within your overall goals. Although it seems like less immediate fun, planned buying results in more overall satisfaction and less money spent.

Planning is well and good but even the truest plans outlive their usefulness and purpose. Opinions and tastes change throughout our lives, and hopefully we continually learn and explore new things. In time, your orchid tastes will change. You will probably find that a group that once held a great degree of fascination now lacks interest. And just as certainly, some group you once despised has now piqued your curiosity and you can't find enough about them. That's ok!! Let it happen! It's all good!!

I'd like to share two examples from my own experience. One of the groups that fascinated me early was the *Oncidium* alliance. I especially love odontoglossums and miltonias. Since I grew my plants outdoors and in a shade house in Southern California and had no way of cooling my house during the summer months, classic crispum type odonts and Columbian miltoniopsis were out of the question. But I found lots of species and intergeneric hybrids to work with. After about ten years of good success with these plants, I gradually lost interest in them. I gave away a number of plants, donated a few to local societies and kept some Mexican and Central American species. Rather than continue to spend time and to use up bench space on a group of plants that were becoming less and less interesting, I passed them on to others who might enjoy them, freeing up space for other plants. As it turns, that was a good thing.

From the beginning of my orchid studies, I could not understand the fascination with "cyps" as they were then called. My mom loved to work with big, waxy ladyslippers. Green and white "maudies" were her true favorite corsage flower because they had such wonderful keeping qualities (I suspect the fact her eldest sister was named Maude might have something to do with it, too). I didn't get it at all. Time passed and in 1975, I came to California. One of the first things I discovered was that there was a HUGE interest in ladyslippers, but now they were called paphiopedilums by everyone and paphs by the true initiates of the cult. Names like Rands, Charles, Hanes and even occasionally Koopowitz were heard on everyone's lips. The big waxy "toads" were out of fashion, thrown by the way-side for species of any type, but especially those that came flooding out of lowland tropical Asia. I still couldn't understand it! What was the fascination with these ugly things? I went back to my cattleyas, stanhopeas and others, loudly proclaiming "I don't grow paphs!" One day a friend came by with a division of *Paph. callosum*. I couldn't turn the plant down without hurting his feelings, so it went on the bench. As time went by, I became more and more involved with the Southern California orchid community and communication with paph and phrag nuts became unavoidable. I then entered the AOS judging system and contact with the dreaded beasts became positively imperative! During the potting season two years later, I realized I

had potted 75 slippers of one kind or another. It seems that I did indeed grow paphs. I also realized that I had formed a direction in the group of slippers that I had acquired. Multifloral paph hybrids formed the bulk of the plants with some *Parvisepalum* hybrids and species rounding out the complement. Soon I noticed some *Phragmipedium* species had crept in the door. Although I don't have the conditions to grow most of the section *Micropetalum* or the *Phragmipedium caudatum* group, the intersectional hybrids do very well for me, so now they have some space on the bench as well.

In both situations, freedom to alter my course and take advantage of new knowledge and new experiences helped me, and to some small degree, the larger orchid community. I let go of one group which became a burden and discovered another I never expected to be a joy!

I hope I have provided some guidelines that are helpful to *Digest* readers. The orchid world is a huge and challenging area of horticulture. It can bring tremendous satisfaction or huge disappointment. My goal is to provide the best conditions that will promote the best growth of my plants. In trying to achieve these goals, I have inadvertently discovered a way to plan and map my progress through the orchid world. Over time, I've realized that there really is a method to my madness and that if I share that method, others will find it useful, too. And that is perhaps the greatest surprise of all!*

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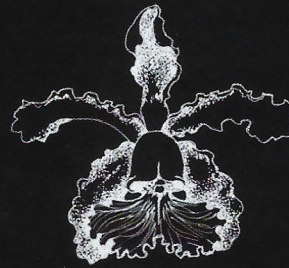
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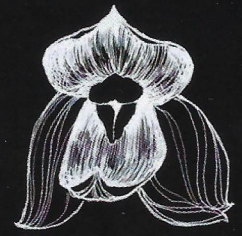
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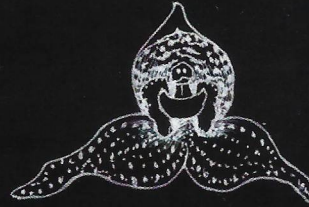


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