

Orchid Culture - the Proper Approach

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The following is an excerpt from an essay that first appeared in the *American Orchid Society BULLETIN* (what later became the current *Orchids Magazine*) in February 1981 launching a many-part series on orchid growing for the beginner. While much has changed in the intervening 28 years the general message remains the same.

I must confess that I underwent a crisis of confidence when the Editor asked me to write a series of cultural articles for the beginner. Had that much time really passed since that day I enthusiastically purchased my first orchid (a *Cattleya* hybrid, of course) - only to have it reject my loving attention soon thereafter? Had I in these dozen years or so, overcoming at least the initial difficulties, grown every species and hybrid, absorbing like velamen (that spongy covering on orchid roots) all the knowledge necessary to grow orchids, and to grow them well? The answer to both of these questions is no - not really.

If I have seemingly discredited myself, and the reader is on the verge of flipping the page in annoyance, let me come to my own defense. The truth of the matter is that, although we rather arbitrarily define such terms as "beginner" and "connoisseur", we are all, to some extent, "ignorant" about orchids. Indeed, some of the fascination with the orchid family is the constant challenge of its complexity. We can never know it all. Rather than claiming complete knowledge, the orchid expert, I suspect, is one who casts a keen and critical eye over all he or she grows, combining this questioning sense with a motivation to find the missing answers.

My intention here and in subsequent articles is to provide the newcomer to orchids with some direction in his first attempts at growing: what questions to ask, and where and how to find the answers. As always, it is up to the individual to provide the essential motivation.

Initial Steps

Though I may very well be biased, joining the American Orchid Society is a proper beginning and a good introduction to orchid growing. Nevertheless, being an A.O.S. member and receiving the BULLETIN (now *Orchids Magazine*) does not a good grower make. An issue of the AMERICAN ORCHID SOCIETY BULLETIN left unread is naturally of very little help to anyone, other than providing the visual stimulus of lots of colorful pictures. At this point I would like to forewarn every new member: You are not going to find everything you need or would like to know in one issue, or even in an entire year's

worth, of the BULLETIN. It is too much to expect of any periodical, much less one appealing to a diverse membership, that it meet your individual needs all the time.

Consider, then, how you will approach this and every issue of the AMERICAN ORCHID SOCIETY BULLETIN, or any other periodical on orchids. If you open every contents page anticipating all the articles to be directly applicable to you, and neglect every article that is not, you will be constantly disappointed. On the other hand, if you approach every written page with a detective-like determination to extract and distill important information, I think you will be pleasantly surprised to find relevance in nearly every article and issue of the BULLETIN - no matter how different the topic is from what you are growing, or think you can grow.

For example, even if you live in a warm climate and fail to grow the cooler-growing genera successfully, an article on their culture might yield some facts of which you were not aware and which you might use to adapt the plants to your different situation. A recent instance of this could be Ned Nash's excellent article, "Colombian-Type *Miltonia* Culture" contained in the May issue of last year's BULLETIN (49(5): 479-485). Here Mr. Nash attempts to dispel the popular notion that *Miltonias* are strictly cool-growing orchids similar in temperature tolerance to *Odontoglossum crispum*-type hybrids. He makes a very important distinction that night temperature is not as critical a factor as day temperature, finding in both his private and commercial experience that *Miltonias* grow successfully with temperatures as high as 65-68F at night, but are more inclined to suffer under high daytime temperatures. Pointing out that *Miltonias* are tougher than generally supposed, he suggests conventional cooling and humidifying systems for warmer regions. Strict *Odontoglossum crispum* hybrids do indeed present a challenge in all but the coolest growing conditions, but a thorough article on their culture, such as "The Culture of *Odontoglossums*" by Dr. J.W. Thomas (Amer. Orchid Soc. Bull. 49 (7): 721-728) could possibly spell out a principle that might make the difference between failure and some success in growing these hybrids; e.g., the importance of air movement, ventilation and humidity, and how these factors, when well provided, can enhance temperature (and light) tolerance. So be leery of the conventional attitudes and categories we all use with respect to orchids. A skeptical and probing mind can, if at all possible, find a way to grow any orchid well.

Beyond the information contained in the articles of each issue of the BULLETIN, don't forget the less obvious "clues". By this I mean the references or bibliographies frequently appearing at the end of articles. These do more than take up space or give an article credibility. They are valuable sources of yet more relevant information.

Local societies are vital to all hobbyists. There is often nothing more helpful or educational as a meeting where you can talk about a common interest with others. Demonstrations of techniques in orchid growing, whether at the frequently-seen plant tables, or in the special cultural programs geared to the beginner and prevalent at local societies, are invaluable instruction. If you find that your local society is not helping you in quite the way you had hoped, then ask about it. Better yet, muster up your

nerve and get involved! [Editor's note: Local Orchid societies affiliated with the American Orchid Society can be searched in the **Affiliated Societies** section of our website.]

Local orchid societies put on local orchid shows, which are nothing less than Bacchanalian feasts to the senses of anyone interested in orchids. A list of shows hosted by AOS affiliated societies can be found in the Events section of our website.

In whatever way you first start growing orchids, the best approach is to read, see and do as much as possible involving orchids. Active participation, after all, is the best instruction.

Those First Plants

Though it may be nothing short of heresy on my part to say this, I do feel that the beginner should try, for a while, to cultivate a certain productive disregard for the lives of orchids, in spite of the tenderness and attachment we all feel for our first plants. I don't mean that you should merrily purchase orchids, bring them home, set them down, wherever, to grow, and wish them all the best of luck. I am suggesting, however, that a little indifference towards the ultimate fate of those first plants might free the novice from the paralyzing fear I know I felt when I found my first orchid declining rapidly. Terrified of doing further damage, irrationally wishing that the plant might recover by itself, I watched aghast as a fungus unfamiliar to me made orchid mush out of my cherished first plant. I learned from this experience not to be reluctant to try. It is never pleasant to replace a plant, but without experimenting, without learning why a plant declines, we cannot hope to become more proficient in the future.

The beginner, I believe, needs to overcome - or ignore - the preconception that orchids are delicate or enigmatic. They are particular, without a doubt, but then most living things are. Orchids, in general, must be quite adaptable, if they can be grown successfully under such diverse conditions as are prevalent in orchid culture today. Like other living things they respond to their surroundings, whether adverse or favorable. The observant eye of the capable grower detects these responses and attempts to interpret them. Orchids do indeed "talk"; the trick is to learn their language. To be fluent in "flourish", like Spanish or English, takes a study of the written word and the nerve to go out and try, many times only to err, sometimes to fail, with those that speak the language.

As for language: no doubt many beginners and experts alike have been bewildered by the Latinized language we all use to communicate with each other on the subject of orchids. Without a basic understanding of the terminology involved, confusion and embarrassment can result. Imagine my embarrassment, and the grower's amusement, when I was first asked which orchids I was growing, or hoped to grow, and I responded, after a moment's confused thought, "Catalinas", - which is not to say that I had an affinity for an island off the California coast, or for the swimwear named thereafter! Gordon W. Dillon, previous Executive Director of the American Orchid Society, Inc. and Editor of its *BULLETIN* for many years, working constantly with this curious language, created *Orchidist's Glossary* (note: the glossary will be published here online in 2012. Also, see **Basic Orchid Glossary**) for

the purpose of better communication between orchid enthusiasts. Listed in alphabetical order are botanical terms, major genera and orchid personages, accompanied by pronunciation keys, concise definitions, and frequent illustrations. So if you find yourself drawing a blank, for example, when someone approaches you and asks, "Do you grow any species or intergeneric hybrids of that Far Eastern genus of monopodial, usually epiphytic orchids typically bearing conduplicate, linear (occasionally terete) leaves with mucronate or erose tips, and axillary racemes of resupinate flowers frequently brightly colored and spotted or tessellated?", consider studying *An Orchidist's Glossary* so that you can more easily understand that the person in question was asking about vandas!

Where to buy your first plants? At the risk of offending those commercial orchid firms that may be located at some distance from you, I would suggest that the beginner, at least with an initial purchase, stick as near to home as possible. Go through the experience of selecting your first plants yourself. Search out any commercial orchid growers at your local orchid society meetings and make appointments for a visit, or ask other members for their recommendations. Visiting other growers' establishments, whether to buy orchids or not, is an eye-opening experience. "Seeing how others do it" will give you a host of new ideas. Most people in the retail orchid business need, and frequently have, the patience of Job. Don't be afraid to request the help of the owner or salesperson in selecting plants suitable for your growing environment and your experience. Try to avoid the more expensive plants, but select plants of flowering size initially. We all need the assurance of flowers in our first, tenuous efforts in orchid culture. If you run into problems, go back to the firm and ask for help, or bring the plant to the next orchid meeting for consultation. The thing to remember is that you are never alone in your mistakes; any seasoned grower will tell you this!

After you have achieved success at growing your first "easy-to-grow" plants, the seemingly unlimited world of orchid species and hybrids will begin to open up to you. Catalogues packed full of temptations, advertisements lurking within and behind text sections of magazines, all offering green for green, will be scratching at your growing-area door. Beware! No one person can hope to grow everything equally well. Experiment, but with some restraint. Just one or two "guinea pigs" of a genus unfamiliar to you is far more economical (if the experiment fails) than many! For your own sense of pride, concentrate on what you like and grow well (unfortunately, all too often the two are not the same!).

Once purchased and brought home, where should you grow your orchids? The possibilities are not limited to a greenhouse, which might be a more suitable proposition when you become more experienced - and hooked. There are other alternatives for the beginner, and the next article for this series will review some of these possibilities. - 84 Sherman Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140.



Brassavola nodosa has traditionally been a "first orchid" for many hobbyists because of its adaptable, easy-growing nature.

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