

The Allure of the Orchid

ORCHIDS HAVE CAPTURED THE CURIOSITY OF GENERATIONS SINCE BEFORE THE TIME CHRIST. ONE THING THAT MAKES THESE PLANTS SO SPECIAL IS THEIR INCREDIBLE DIVERSITY. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A TYPICAL ORCHID.

Few plants inspire the passion that orchids do. Orchid enthusiasts have been described with words like "passionate," and "obsessed," and many spend large amounts of money and time coaxing their treasures into bloom. How do ordinary people find themselves with a growing collection of these plants? What is the orchid's allure?

People have collected and grown orchids for more than 2,000 years. The hobby became particularly popular during the early 19th century, after William Cattley realized the packing material that arrived with some tropical plants was also plant material. He tried to get it to grow, and when it bloomed in 1818 it rocked the world of horticulture. (Cattleya orchids bear his name.) Fanatical collectors filled glass conservatories with orchids, hired professional orchid hunters to bring back new varieties and engaged in subterfuge to keep their discoveries to themselves. The price of orchids soared and it took years for the confusion about growing techniques to settle. Eventually, orchidists learned how to propagate and cultivate orchids and the orchid world stabilized.

Jim Clarkson, orchid curator at the USF Botanical Garden, bought his first orchid in 1984 when he moved to Tampa. "The next spring it bloomed and I was hooked," he admitted. "I have been studying and learning more about orchids each year. Orchids are the most diverse and advanced plants in nature, and with [thousands] of known species there is always something new to learn," he said. "Last month I saw a plant that is probably one of the greatest orchid finds in the world in the past 10 years. This discovery opens up an entirely new direction of breeding. When you buy or make a new hybrid and see it getting ready to bloom, you are like an expectant father. When the flower opens, it is always a great feeling to see what you have created."

The beauty of orchids' blooms attracts Lyla K. Shepard, the training and development chairman for the Tampa Orchid Club, Inc.



ABOVE: The Phalaenopsis orchid comes in many different colors and its blooms can last for several months.

"Orchid plants are not renowned for their beauty, but their blooms are. And they are extremely interesting. They are a flower that people come together to enjoy and I enjoy the group participation."

Growing orchids is not as difficult as many think. Understanding the orchid's natural habitat contributes to success. There are three general types of orchids—terrestrial, or orchids that grow in or on the ground; epiphytic, or orchids that grow on another plant, usually a tree; and lithophytic or rupicolous, orchids that grow on rocks. Each type has different moisture, light and soil needs. Clarkson noted, "Good

conditions for one may mean death for another. But there are some general guidelines for the ones we normally grow. If the conditions are such that you are comfortable, then your orchids are probably comfortable. This means the orchids need clean moving air, moderate temperatures, good water, good plant food in small quantities and good light so that the leaves are light to medium green. More orchids are killed by kindness than just about anything else. Orchids are very efficient plants and over-watering is one of the worst things you can do. Second, there are so many types of orchids that require different culture, the



ABOVE: Ascocendas like light and are a good choice to grow in a screened-in pool area.

only way to grow them properly is to learn the requirements of each type that you grow. The local orchid societies are the best places to learn these requirements. Most growers are anxious to let others know what they have learned, in many cases the hard way."

Lyla Shepard also encourages new orchid hobbyists to join an orchid club. "I think all people who want to grow orchids should join an orchid club because...it's our mission to teach people to grow orchids and to care for them. [If they join a club] they have the opportunity of seeing beautiful orchids every month at our meetings, or associating with other people who share their hobby. [Clubs] always have interesting programs, they sell supplies and it is just the easy way to learn to take care of plants you love. Within a club you can function at any level you wish, whether you wish to just attend and enjoy...or whether you wish to participate and learn by doing. We have culture classes in each of the clubs that people can attend on their own when they wish, and learn with hands-on instruction from the most experienced people."

As for specific varieties, Clarkson suggests, "For the novice grower, it is best to grow orchids that are fast growers and good bloomers. Fortunately, there are quite a few to choose from today. For late winter and spring blooming plants, *Phalaenopsis* cannot be beat. They are fast growers, come in many different colors and color patterns and produce long inflorescences that can last for several months. The down side is that they are one of the easiest to kill if not taken care of properly. Other genera to consider are *Oncidium*s and *Dendrobium*s. Current *Oncidium* hybrids produce beautifully colored, long lasting displays several times a year. Most of the easily grown *Dendrobium*s are normally fall bloomers. They too have long-lasting flowers. There are some hybrids that can bloom so frequently that they are almost always in bloom.

"Another great choice is *Ascocendas*. These take a fair amount of light to grow properly and are excellent for someplace like a screened-in pool area. The current hybrids are bred to bloom almost continuously if given good light, water and food.

"For the more advanced orchid grower, the choices today are staggering. There are literally thousands of species and hybrids for sale at local nurseries. The more advanced grower will choose additional orchids based on the type of growing conditions he can provide. Some orchids like *Cattleyas* and *Vandas* like good light while other genera, like *Masdevallias* and *Paphiopedilums* do best in lower light. *Stanhopias*, *Catasetums* and *Bulbophyllums* are also good choices. The flowers are a little more unusual than the ones we typically see, but can produce some spectacular flowers and unusual fragrances—some quite good and some quite bad!" said Clarkson.



ABOVE: *Oncidium* hybrids, with their beautiful colors and long-lasting flowers, are a good variety for beginners to try.

"Unfortunately," he cautioned, "Some of the most beautiful orchids come from high altitude in the tropics and require much cooler temperatures than we can provide for them to grow and bloom. They are tempting, but stay away from the cool growers."

Where to find your orchids? In addition to local growers, there are many good commercial growers in Florida, as well as in other states, especially Hawaii and California. You can get a list of growers from the American Orchid Society (<http://www.orchidweb.org>). Another good place to buy orchids is at orchid shows sponsored by the local orchid societies. "Twice a year the three clubs in the area work together to put on a local orchid show," said Shepard. "The fall show, which will probably be in early November, will be at the Florida Botanical Garden in Largo. In the spring of each year, we put on a show in Tampa at the Tampa Garden Center. Once you join an orchid club, you get a newsletter every month and all the upcoming shows are listed."

The allure of the orchid can be found in its beauty, or the challenge of growing unique and interesting plants, or the even the social aspects of orchid growing. As Shepard said, "It's a hobby that you can have for a lifetime. You can enjoy it in so many different ways."

Local Orchid Societies:

Tampa Orchid Club, Inc. (813) 839-4791
Florida West Coast Orchid Society
Pinellas County Cooperative Ext. Service Largo (727) 596-2798
Tampa Bay Orchid Society (813) 968-3402

Other Resources:

<http://www.orchidweb.org/> (The American Orchid Society)
<http://orchiddigest.org/>
<http://www.orchidmall.com/>
USF Botanical Garden (813) 974-2329

Local Orchid Suppliers

Louis Del Favero
6601 Gant Rd., Tampa (813) 961-8277
Art Stone Co.
3611 Tyrone Blvd., St. Petersburg (727) 345-6733
Florida Native Orchids
6820 2nd St. N., St. Petersburg (727) 527-2821
Phelps Farm Orchids
15808 Timberwood Dr., Tampa (813) 961-8427
Live Oak Orchids
1223 Crawford St., Tampa (813) 236-8309