



**St. Augustine Orchid Society**

[www.staugorchidsociety.org](http://www.staugorchidsociety.org)

## **Phalaenopsis Get a Bad Rap**

by Sue Bottom, [sbottom15@hotmail.com](mailto:sbottom15@hotmail.com)

Some orchid growers look down their noses at phalaenopsis, as if they were second class citizens. It's hard to understand, given the diversity in their sizes, shapes, colors and blooming habits. Perhaps they considered common because they are so widely available. The flip side of that coin is they are widely available because they are so easy to cultivate and hold their blooms for so long.



So many different colors, sizes and shapes!

For many of us, our first orchid was a phalaenopsis, probably one of the big standard phalaenopsis with long arching inflorescences that last around 3 months. The commercial growers have learned how to trigger flowering at will by chilling them, so you can find them in bloom during any month of the year at the grocery and big box stores. Once they are in your growing area, they will revert to their more natural growing and blooming habit. They can be summered outdoors in a shady area protected from rain, where they get buoyant air and a drop in nighttime temperatures. When our first cold fronts come through around Halloween, let them get a little chill as long as temperatures don't drop below 50 or 55F. This will trigger them to flower next spring. By mid-November they should be in their summer home and you can expect them to start spiking around Christmas and blooming around Valentine's Day. If you are going to repot them, cut the flower spikes and get them situated in their new home by Independence Day, so they can reestablish and be ready to do it again next year.

The species native to warm and humid habitats from the subgenus Phalaenopsis are easiest to grow and most commonly found in cultivation. They include the species *amabilis*, *aphrodite*, *philippinensis*, *sanderiana*, *schilleriana*, *stuartiana*, *equestris*, *lindenii*, and *pulcherrima* (formerly *Doritis pulcherrima*). These plants are also the basis for the majority of white, pink and purple hybrids available today in many grocery stores and gardening centers.



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*Phal. equestris* 'Sunkist', by Suzanne Susko  
An influential species in multifloral phal breeding

You might become enamored of the multifloral phals, originally called sweetheart phals. The multiflorals were developed in California by Herb Hager using the phal species *equestris*, *stuartiana*, *lindenii* and *amabilis* var. *formosana*. The flowers are smaller than their standard sized cousins, but there are so many more flowers often on branching stems. They may come in smallish pots when purchased, but they will grow into larger plants, although maybe not as large as a standard phal. You can find in all the same colors and patterns as their standard sized cousins.

There is a second group of species from warm and humid equatorial regions at lower elevations that are used in novelty phalaenopsis breeding. These brightly colored phals

from the *Polychilos* subgenus include the species *amboinensis*, *gigantea*, *lueddemanniana*, *venosa*, *bellina*, and *violacea*. Many of the novelty phalaenopsis are summer blooming, with green waxy foliage that makes them attractive plants, even out of bloom. As an added bonus, some are delightfully fragrant. The flowers tend to be star shaped, with fewer flowers on the stem than a standard phal, but the stems can produce blooms for several years so you should not cut them until they wither and turn brown. These warm-growing plants do not benefit from the cool winter temperature dip that triggers blooming in standard phalaenopsis. Instead, they need warmer temperatures and really thrive when kept just above 80 F during the day and in the mid 60s at night. If repotting is necessary, it should be completed by February so they will have a chance to recover from transplant shock prior to initiating summer blooms.



*Phal. amboinensis*, by Terry Bottom  
An influential species in novelty phal breeding



*Phal. bellina* var. *alba*, by Leslie Brickell  
A summer blooming novelty with a delightful fragrance

The quest for brightly colored novelties started when a standard white or pink flower was crossed with a brightly colored species to produce brightly colored flowers. First came the yellows in the mid 80's, with the heavy influence of *Phalaenopsis amboinensis*. Then came the reds, where a yellow flowered phal was bred with a purple to produce shades ranging from orange red to deep lavender burgundy. In the mid-90's, breeding with a mutated form of *Phalaenopsis Golden Pecker* gave rise the Harlequin type phals, that typically have a white or yellow base color and randomly distributed blotches of



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color. They vary in size and shape and can be different from flower to flower, creating very unusual patterns.



*Phal. parishii*, by Suzanne Susko  
Miniature phals are difficult to grow, but rewarding when they bloom

There is a third group of miniature species that are the most difficult to grow. From the subgenera Parishinae and Aphyllae, the species *gibbosa*, *lobbii*, *parishii*, and *wilsonii* grow at higher elevations in seasonally cool and dry areas. Some are deciduous and growers have mistaken them for dead during the winter, when they are simply dormant.



Phal. (City Girl x Krull's Butterfly),  
by Terry Bottom

The latest craze is the big lip phalaenopsis, who knows what they'll come up with next year!

You can go so many directions in collecting phals. Whether you start with the large, shingled white phals or branch into the colorful novelties, their ease of growth and long lived blooms will give you great pleasure year after year.

### Additional Reading:

Advanced Phalaenopsis Care: Summer vs Winter Blooming Phals, <https://herebutnot.com/phalaenopsis-spikes-like-hot-need-cool/>

Phalaenopsis, Carlos Fighetti, <https://www.bbg.org/gardening/article/phalaenopsis>