

How to Make Your Collection Work for You

ASSEMBLING A QUALITY ORCHID collection can require strategy and discipline. It is easy to succumb to the temptation to purchase every pretty plant that crosses your path, and struggle to do your best to care for them. If you have never considered the what, why, when, where and how, so far as your orchid pursuit is concerned, perhaps now is the time to put some thought into your endeavor.

You first should appreciate and understand your limits — a simple statement with several meanings.

Each of us is limited in the types of orchids we may cultivate based on the growing environment we can provide for them. A grower with a greenhouse can grow more different kinds of orchids than a windowsill hobbyist, while the outdoor gardener in a semitropical climate has different options than the sun-porch hor-ticulturist in the north. It was a sage day that I opted to leave the growing of vandas to my friends in Florida, even though I must admit that a few of my fellow Coloradans have been able to produce more respectable examples than was I. Conversely, there is a good reason that few miltoniopsis are seen at the Miami Orchid Show. It is discouraging, if not pointless, to frustrate yourself by struggling to grow orchids unsuitable to your growing conditions. There are plenty of beautiful orchids for nearly every climate.

Knowing your limits also includes appreciating the number of plants that you have the time and space to cultivate. Additionally, even though high-quality orchid plants are much more affordable than they were just a few decades ago, budgetary limits are also a frequent consideration for the orchid collector, particularly during those first years of enthusiastic acquisition. Put some thought into whether you would rather spend a given amount on one mature flowering plant than several immature seedlings. Both approaches can have merit.

As your collection begins to expand, it is important to develop and maintain some good habits. Observe your plants regularly, probably daily. Be vigilant for signs of pests and disease. Isolate and treat those plants with identifiable problems.

Establish plans or schedules for routine tasks such as watering, fertilization and repotting. Find a method that works for you to keep at least some basic records on your orchid collection and its culture, so that you have some documentation to help you understand and learn from both your triumphs and defeats.

But there is more to a great orchid collection than self restraint and discipline. A collection usually has a focus or direction that is often, but not always, readily identifiable. Some collectors specialize in one type of orchid. Most orchid society members know the cattleya specialists, phal-aenopsis fanatics, species nuts and paphiopedilum enthusiasts in their group. For other growers, flower color is a focus unto itself. I have known collectors who search for almost any white orchid, as well as those who specialize in blue or coerulea flowers. Consciously or not, it seems that over time, certain colors of orchid flowers tend to predominate in any individual's collection. Size of flower can also become the obsession. For some there are none too large; for others there are none too small.

Regardless of other preferences and considerations, many orchidists are eventually drawn to acquiring and cultivating the best quality flowers possible. Yet flower quality can mean very different things to different people.

MERICLONES A strategy for assembling a collection with better than average flowers may include purchasing mericlones of orchids that have received AOS flower-quality awards, providing you share the aesthetics of the occasionally controversial domain of orchid judges. As I began to acquire orchids in earnest, and became familiar with the AOS awards system, I never failed to purchase the occasional FCC mericlone that crossed my path.

The FCC (First Class Certificate) is the highest of the AOS flower-quality awards, yet surprisingly few of the winning plants are mericloned and distributed. I suspect that I have owned less than a half dozen.

While some of the flowers produced by the FCC mericlones have indeed been remarkable, others confirmed that superior culture is as important to winning this prestigious award as are good genes. I have had equal and better performance from HCC (Highly Commended Certificate) and AM (Award of Merit) mericlones, which confirms that any of the AOS flower-quality award winners may make worthy additions to a collection. But I know one orchid judge who eschews mericlones. She prefers to acquire seedlings so that each of her plants has a unique genotype; a worthy, if more challenging approach.

LOCAL SOURCES A dynamic orchid collection usually reflects the interests of an orchid grower who is continually learning, and it bears repeating that one of the best ways to grow with the hobby is to become involved with your local orchid society. You will come into contact with regional experts and may have the opportunity to visit the collections of fellow growers. And when you do, you come away with a new idea on how to better cultivate your own plants and frequently discover an orchid new to you through your host's enthusiasm for favorites.

It is important to seek and grow orchids that reflect your personal taste. When I was getting started with orchids, I kept a list of those that I wanted to acquire. I struggled to keep it a short one. It included plants I discovered through reading, as well as ones seen at society show tables and orchid shows. Today's Internet browsers would likely find candidates for their list through that medium too.

With tens of thousands of orchid species and their hybrids, the search for particular ones would seem futile, yet I think you may be surprised how many you will encounter. Hobbyists seem to favor and rediscover the same and similar orchids over and over again. Even decades-old hybrids may be recloned if they are superior. Species that are presumed to be uncommon can unexpectedly appear on growers' sales tables, so keep watching for them. Occasionally, your quests will take you to an orchid auction or an orchid society's sales table where divisions are sold. Keep an eye out as well for offspring of the hybrids or species you seek. In some cases, these may actually be a better find.

Your wish list should be viewed as a work in progress and will change as your orchid tastes and growing skills develop. If it does not curb aimless orchid acquisitions, perhaps it may at least help direct them. An outstanding orchid collection reflects the passion of its thoughtful yet enthusiastic curator.