

Understanding Orchid Tags

At the April 2024 FGOS meeting, Sandi Block-Brezner spoke to the Newbie Group on understanding orchid name tags. Sandi is an accredited AOS Judge with the West Palm Beach Judging Center, as well as an award-winning orchid hobbyist.

It is important to know the names of your plants to aid in providing correct growing conditions, to facilitate discussions with other hobbyists and growers, and to speak to vendors or exhibitors to gather information about your new acquisition. There are over 900 orchid genera, 28,000 – 30,000 identified orchid species, and over 100,000 hybrids. New species are being found and new hybrids are created daily!

When you buy a plant at an orchid show from a vendor, it should have a name tag. If not, ask for one. A tag may reveal a lot of information about an orchid: at the very least, it will give the name of the orchid indicated by genus and/or species. Or it may also indicate if the orchid is a hybrid, a clone (short for mericlone), when it was started, if it has received an award, and the name of the vendor or grower. Orchids that you purchase in a big box store or food store may not have a name tag.

There are two types of orchid name tags: species and hybrids. Species are plants naturally occurring in nature, while hybrids are usually manmade, and a mericlone is when the genetic material of a specific orchid has been replicated to create hundreds of identical plants.

The genus name is always capitalized on a name tag while the species name is always lower case, in Latin, and italicized (i.e., *Maxillaria variabilis*). The genus name can be abbreviated. A hybrid name tag may also include the names of both parents connected by a small 'x', and a common name made up by the hybridizer; i.e., *Brassavola* Little Stars (*B. nodosa* x *B. subulifolia*). A hybrid can be named after a person, for a color, or anything in common language! If the plant is awarded, whether a species or hybrid, it receives a cultivar name which is a name given by the exhibitor, which can also be a person's name, descriptive statement, etc. (i.e., *Maxillaria variabilis* 'Carolyn' AM/AOS; *Brassavola* Little Stars 'Evening Delight' CCM/AOS). Do be aware that some growers who register their hybrids with the RHS (Royal Horticultural Society) give their hybrids a cultivar name even if it has not been awarded.

You might see an unidentified plant with a tag indicating NOID, short for "No I.D." It is a good idea to add the genus if it doesn't have one, so you know how to care for that plant (i.e., *Cattleya* NOID).

When acquiring a new orchid, begin by reading the tag to gather information, and then research how to best care for the plant. Focus on the amount of light needed, frequency of watering, and preferred media or mounting. The American Orchid Society website, aos.org, is the best source of reliable information.

Sandi recommends creating two identical or very similar tags for each plant and attaching them to the pot or basket or even burying one in the pot. Tags are frequently lost; having a backup is helpful. Use a sharp #2 pencil or a Sharpie Pro fine tip pen to create durable tags. Write the scientific Latin name as well as the common name of the plant. The plant owner may add to the basic tag by writing in the month and year of purchase, who it was purchased from, how much it cost, and when it was last repotted. You can also add to the back of the tag, or make a separate tag, stating last

date of blooming so that you know when to expect it to bloom again, as well as the number of blooms. You'll want to track how well the plant is growing and improving.

Specialized colored tags of your choosing may be used to indicate that a plant is under treatment for fungus or pest; if it has a virus but you plan to keep it anyway; if it is sensitive to the cold and needs to be brought inside when temperatures drop; or if you are adding an extra treatment/fertilizer/water to its weekly routine. This type of differentiation allows orchids to be swiftly identified and treated as needed. Hobbyists may want to group all temperature sensitive orchids together in the growing area, while diseased orchids and virused orchids should be isolated. Sandi uses Red tags for problems, Pink tags for cold, Blue tags for extra watering, Purple tags for divisions, and Orange tags for Bifoliate Cattleyas (which can only be repotted at certain times!)

Knowing and using the names of your orchids is like knowing the names of your friends. The more often you use these names, the more comfortable you'll become when referring to them and sharing stories about your orchid growing successes.

Sandi Block-Brezner, AOS Judge

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