

August 2013 - Growing Tips for August

A monthly growers advice column by Courtney Hackney. Hackneau@comcast.net

While there are many facets to growing orchids that hobbyists must learn, there are only two real stages. The first stage can generally be called the "learning stage". Developing familiarity with orchid names, understanding the cultural needs of different orchid groups and finally applying all of the knowledge gained from books, lectures, fellow orchid hobbyists, and experts to your own situation. It does not matter if you grow under lights, on windowsills or in a greenhouse, this "learning stage" occurs. You know you are out of this stage when your biggest problem comes from having more orchids than space.

This phase can take a few years or decades, depending on the individual. Often, the process moves from windowsill culture to lights and finally into a greenhouse. There are great differences between each requiring continual learning and cultural adaptation. Most hobbyists never finish this phase, which is fortunate for those who sell orchids.

Hobbyists in this phase must continually replace plants lost as they learn proper culture, pest and disease control and repotting. Hobbyists in the "learning stage" often lack sympathy for hobbyists that make it to the "containment stage". This stage is characterized by the need to constantly discard orchids because they keep multiplying. This stage can be confused with a process that occurs in stage one, buying more plants than there is space for. Hobbyists in stage one need to recognize stage two hobbyists because they are a source of both cultural advice and plants. More importantly, orchids from a nearby hobbyist are likely already adapted to local conditions. Their culture, i.e., potting mix, pot type, etc., also provides a model for those in the early stages of stage one.

The transition from stage one is usually not obvious to the grower. It begins when one particular group of orchids, e.g., intergeneric oncidiums begin to fill pots and are always in flower. It might seem that this would be an obvious transition point into stage two, but most hobbyists seem to enjoy the frustration of failure and begin to purchase orchids more difficult to grow.

The usual pattern is to try hybrids of other orchid groups such as Cattleyas. Once these are growing well and the challenge becomes repotting, species begin to grow as a percentage of a collection, often at the exclusion of the orchids that were once

such a challenge, but now take up too much space. Hobbyists satisfied with their ability to grow the orchids that initially attracted them to the hobby could easily move into stage two, but sadly most abandon the hobby. For the rest, moving to increasingly challenging types of orchids becomes the mantra. Given the number of orchid species and groups, one may never graduate to the second stage, even though knowledge and cultural expertise becomes extensive. Ultimately, hobbyists entering stage two either specialize in one group of orchids, e.g. Bulbophyllums, or some unique grouping, e.g. Classic Cattleyas. A very few make their own hybrids, which produces the greatest problem plaguing members of stage two; deciding which seedlings to keep. It is one thing to discard a hybrid purchased long ago or a clone for which there are thousands of duplicates, but discarding your own hybrid clones is like tossing your own children out. While each one may not be awardable, each has special attributes that only you as the hybridizer can appreciate.

So, weep for me this fall! Selecting from among my own seedlings that have already been selected for some special trait and/or selecting which of my favorite classic cattleyas or phalaenopsis to keep must happen before it gets cold. Or... perhaps I can talk my spouse into expanding my greenhouse! Of course, then can lead to stage three; "the divorce" stage.

Jacksonville Orchid Society member Dr. Courtney Hackney, Retired Emeritus Professor of Biology at the University of North Florida, is a noted author and acknowledged "orchid expert." He published a column of orchid advice that ran for many years, and we are presenting select articles with his permission.

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