

November 2005 - Orchid Nurseries

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

November is the month where it is finally necessary to admit that winter is coming. Now is the time for even the worst procrastinators to check heaters, light pilot lights, and acquire gas or oil. This is likely to be a painful proposition given the high cost of energy. Imagine having to heat several large commercial greenhouses this winter. This is what is facing the commercial growers here in the Continental U.S. this winter. Given this fact it is not surprising to see slightly higher orchid prices at my favorite nurseries.

High fuel prices are occurring at a time when a number of well-known orchid nurseries have already ceased operation or are in the process of closing. Lenette Orchids, where many excellent cattleya and phalaenopsis hybrids were developed, closed its doors this year. Its legacy remains in the fine art-shade cattleyas seen in orchid shows. It was at Lenette Orchids where Ken Griffith line-breed Phal Hilo Lip for five generations until he attained dark pink clones with their contrasting white lips that grows well in our warmer climate. The latest issue of Carter & Holmes fall catalog illustrates one of these clones. Unfinished was Ken's drive to create a pink phal with a bright yellow lip.

Another loss to the Orchid World this year is Everglades Orchids, where warm growing members of the oncidium and cymbidium alliance were developed. The innovative and dedicated work of the owner and hybridizer, Milton Carpenter, remains in many of our greenhouses where cymbidiums and different-looking oncidiums flourish in the heat of southern summers. Rumor has it that much of this line will be continued at Carter & Holmes where an important portion of their stud plants can now be found.

Those of us in the Carolinas were fortunate to get a visit from Sue Fordyce a few months ago. Some did not realize that the plants she brought with her were some of the last ones that would come from Fordyce Orchids. Their lease was lost and there was no location available to move. Frank Fordyce produced some remarkable hybrids during his life, many at his Livermore nursery, including some of the best miniature and compact hybrids available today. One look at his recent hybrids makes cattleya lovers wish that Fordyce Orchids would remain forever. Fortunately, he has not lost his love of cattleyas and hybrids and will retain some of his favorite clones in a backyard greenhouse so he can continue hybridizing.

Breckenridge Orchids was put up for sale last year. Here some of the most remarkable phalaenopsis hybrids produced in the U.S. were made by Mark Rose. Over the years Mark also made some excellent cattleyas hybrids. More recently paphiopedalum hybrids were produced as well. Anyone that attended any of the local shows in the Carolinas or the monthly judging of the Carolinas Judging Center will also attest to Mark's growing skills.

The loss of Kensington Orchids a few years ago and its owner and hybridizer, Merritt Huntington, this year is a reminder that a great generation of hybridizers is ending. Some are speculating that in a few more years, orchids will no longer be grown and hybridized in the U.S. Undoubtedly, there are changes coming in the orchid business that will affect all hobbyists. This comes at a time when orchids are more popular and more available than ever. Will all orchids soon be hybridized, grown, and shipped from tropical countries? Are commercial growers in the U.S. doomed?

There will certainly be a continuation of what has occurred; well-known hybridizers retiring and leaving the business and fewer large nurseries. However, similar mega-scale changes in the orchid business have happened before. In the 1950s and early 1960s many huge orchid nurseries that had flourished and grown based on selling cut flowers for corsages closed and sold their stock. Many rare and once prized plants were sold for pennies on the dollar. Growers raised in this business thought that the orchid business was over. A few however, focused on hobbyists and thrived. The orchid business of the 21st Century seems to be one based on the mass production of orchids for people that enjoy orchid flowers more than orchid plants. Profit margins are small and nurseries entering this market rely on mass production and marketing, not on flower quality.

Orchid nurseries that remain profitable will need to adapt to these new conditions and exploit these new markets. Unfortunately, the sale of large numbers of previously unavailable clones from nurseries going out of business is flooding the hobbyist market with great orchids at low prices, making profits for those that continue even harder to realize. Many new, niche orchid nurseries are developing that cater to smaller groups of hobbyists. These businesses have always been around, but are likely to become an ever more important part of the orchid growing landscape. These and the traditional orchid nurseries that successfully make the transition will become the new American orchid nursery business, which relies on plants shipped from all over the world as well as local products developed by hobbyists and small nurseries.

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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