

October 2009 - The Aging Orchidist

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

There is a saying among orchid hobbyists that "there is no such thing as a greenhouse too large". For those addicted to orchids this will not come as a shock. All of us constantly must limit our acquisitions or face the prospect of finding more growing space. It does not matter if one has 12 or 12 thousand orchids; there is always the need for more space.

Many of us "senior growers" like to think that we have mastered enough discipline to curate our collections so that the quality of the orchids is always improving. Favorites from long ago mingle with newly discovered special orchids so that it is difficult to find an orchid we like better. Even the super seedlings purchased a few years before do not match favorites collected over the years.

There are a few such growers in every orchid club. They look over each speaker's sales table very carefully and only rarely purchase an orchid. These few have mastered the art of orchid collecting. Each meeting they bring a few of their favorites for everyone to enjoy and take great pride in having found old or rare clones of special hybrids or species. Such a collection takes a lifetime to build.

One of the most heartbreaking tragedies I have observed over the years has come from visiting an old orchid-growing friend or an older hobbyist whose orchid collection was well-known. In many instances, collections once carefully maintained had clearly exceeded the ability of their owner to take care of them. To see fantastic and rare orchids covered with scale or shriveled from lack of water is difficult.

Many great orchid collections were lost when their owners were rushed to a hospital or unable to spend time with their collection because of family illness. Snowstorms, power outages, and other devastating events seem to always occur during these times.

One famous South Florida orchidist, Robert Scully, Sr, turned his orchid business over to his son, Jones & Scully, Inc, and moved to Ocala, Florida. He selected only a small number of his famous clones to take with him; a number small enough to take care of in retirement. I always wondered which clones he selected given the fantastic collection from which he had to choose in his nursery.

At various times, I have tried to contemplate the dilemma of aging and reducing the size of my collection so that adequate care could be given to my favorite

orchids. How does one reduce their collection from several thousand to a hundred or twenty-five. It came as some comfort to discover that Robert Scully, Sr., also could not resist adding a favorite clone or two each time he visited the family business in Miami such that his small greenhouse in Ocala was soon stuffed.

Clearly, even the strongest-willed orchid lovers among us cannot manage to slowly shrink their collection as they age. Helen Congleton, who passed away a few years ago, introduced me to a different approach. She maintained that the orchids in her greenhouse did not really belong to her. She was just taking care of these treasures for awhile and was responsible for transferring them to others that would do the same.

Each time one of her cattleyas grew out of the pot, she would cut the lead three bulbs, pot the division and give the remaining bulbs in the old pot to an orchid growing friend that had expressed an interest in that orchid. She did the same with keikis of phals and cuttings or divisions for everything she treasured. Today, I am the guardian of a number of these plants and I try to do the same; search for a suitable host to whom I will someday transfer the orchid.

Most of us prepare a will or let our loved ones know our wishes when we die, but often the orchids we so diligently collected and cared for are forgotten in that preparation. Recently, I made a list of my favorite orchids. Beside each plant is the name of someone I know that expressed an interest in the clone. In the case of some sudden event, my wish is that these be distributed to those named. So many great collections are lost or sold en mass as pot plants to people who do not appreciate how unique a special old clone is or the role a clone played in breeding today's magnificent hybrids.

The only way to ensure that others will be able to appreciate these special orchids in the future and add them to their collections is to share and be sure that there is someone designated to care for what was once very special to you. Today, my collection is full of orchids that came from special people I have known over the years and each time that orchid blooms I remember them. That is just a special benefit of being a host for "special orchids".

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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