

September 2012 - Advice Caution

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

Advice is a commodity easy to come by and this column is no exception. The problem comes in how it is used. The exact same words can have very different meanings to people based on their knowledge and past experience. In addition, each orchid grower has different goals and growing conditions that make generic advice dangerous.

During a recent speaking tour, a number of hobbyists told me stories of how badly their orchids had grown after they changed the way they were taking care of their orchids. In one case, a hobbyist altered their medium because a visiting speaker's plants were growing extremely well in a medium they had never used. In another case, a recommended fertilizer did not produce the growth expected and in fact caused problems they had never experienced before.

Almost every speaker I hear at society events cautions the audience to remember that their conditions may be different when providing cultural advice and the same is regularly done in this column. Even commercial growers, however, can succumb to the temptation to try something new.

Every year there are new media, new fertilizers and new treatments for pests and disease and I will confess that I usually try them all plus a few of my own. Occasionally, one works well under my growing conditions and it is incorporated into my general culture. Most of the time, however, it does not and becomes fodder for this column. The unfortunate part is the fact that what does not work for me under my cultural conditions may work under yours.

Becoming a great orchid grower requires some experimentation, but everyone needs a starting point. That may mean keeping new plants in the medium they came in or treating extra divisions with something new that just came on the market. During any experiment you still need to apply common sense. For example, if you try a new medium that is clearly more dense and holds water longer, you will need to think about all of the cultural aspects of that change. Longer intervals between watering is an obvious consequence, but you might also need less fertilizer or even a different fertilizer altogether.

The key point is to remember that your orchids are used to specific cultural conditions and have adapted to your conditions. Alter any one variable of culture, i.e.

light, temperature, water quality or quantity, humidity, air movement, fertilizer, or media, and an otherwise successful cultural environment can become less so. Some of the most successful orchid growers I know are best characterized as "minimalists", i.e. just give their orchids the basics and they rarely change anything about their culture. They follow the same approach when it comes to treatments of pests and disease and are very cautious when it comes to using new products, often waiting many years before even trying them. A number of products in the past seemed great but caused long-term problems for either orchids, the grower or both.

As one who provides the best insight and advice I have, I am not insulted when someone chooses not to follow my advice. The cautious person waits for others to try something new before they do.

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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