

How my orchids survive while I am away

By Darryl Corbett



Getting the balance between growing orchids and travel can mean exploring alternative and innovative culture.

Growing orchids has the potential to be an all-consuming past time. It's like a cold lazy breeze, it gets into your bones and psyche. You start out with one or two orchids from friends and family, buy a couple more just to see how easy or hard it is to grow them, then follow through on a suggestion to join an orchid society and before you know it you need a shade house or glasshouse or both. First you think just a small growing area will do, after all, you're not hooked yet, but that seemed to fill up pretty quick and now you're looking for more room to build another shade house. The more time and money you invest in your new hobby the less time you have for other things you enjoyed.

We live on the Northwest Coast of Tasmania, about 2Km inland from the coast. I started growing orchids in our garden in about 2002, (now I grow a dozen or more genera and about 350 orchids outside in the garden). As time went by, I purchased a small glasshouse then four years later, I pulled the wood shed down and put up a second glasshouse, then a small lean-to shade house. Neither glasshouse is or has been heated but I do run a small heat pad through the colder months for any small

seedlings or a few others that like it a bit warmer. As the cymbidium collection grew, they were hung from the trees and on pipe rails against the house under the eaves.

At some point you realize that you haven't been away from home for more than a couple of days and the boat and the fly rod haven't seen water since you can't remember when. So, I set up a micro spray system through the orchids in the garden and operated it manually for a start and then I decided to get one of those battery powered tap timers with a view to setting one up in the glasshouse at a later date. I set it up to come on two or three times a day, every day of the week. It worked well, up until it started to get colder, so I left the timer set but turned the tap off and for the next six months the timer continued to cycle but no watering was done. Later the next spring I hitched the boat up loaded the fly rod in the car turned the tap back on because the days had started warming up and away we went for a day's fishing. When we returned home later that evening the watering system had duly turned on not long after we had left that morning and was still going strong eight hours later. There was water everywhere. Into the bin went the tap timer and I've been manually watering ever since.



Orchids in the garden after the sprayers are turned off

Having decided not to pursue the set and forget approach to watering, I set about devising another system that would drip feed the water to trays on the benches in the glasshouses. I use a 100mm plastic sewer pipe which runs the length of the glasshouse, and holds about 20 litres of water which after filling then drips through micro drippers, as fast, or as slowly as I want. The trays I filled with fine blue metal,

and sat the pots of orchids on them. When these trays fill with water it then wicks down through other orchids hanging off that bench to the next bench below. I also have another pipe hung horizontally from the roof of the glasshouse to drip feed the hanging baskets.



100mm sewer pipe with micro drippers

The Draculas have their own plastic pipe mounted above them with nylon material wicks to each pot. The pipe holds ten litres of water and takes about four days to empty, slowly dripping from the wicks.



The Draculas getting drip fed

In the other glasshouse I have made three wet walls for all the little Pleurothallis and other small growing genera that like extra humidity through summer. I have used plastic pipes with drippers that feed into soaker hoses which then seep onto a frame covered with geo-fabric which has pockets to hold pots or mounts.



One of the wet walls.

In mid-May 2013 we had our first trip overseas. We were to be away for five weeks altogether which meant the orchids in the glasshouses would need some attention from someone. Our daughter bravely put her hand up to do the job, despite not having that much interest in orchids, or the spare time. I spent quite a bit of time before we left drawing a plan of each glasshouse showing which orchids were where, and how often they would need watering. I even put masking tape with instructions written on it on pots and bench sections to try and keep it as simple as possible to remember. There would be no need to fertilize, that would just complicate things and they could go that long without a feed anyway.

The morning before we left to go to the airport, I watered all the orchids, gave our daughter final instructions and impressed upon her that if time or weather conspired against her, the chances of all of them dying whilst we were away just wouldn't happen. What about the orchids in the garden, do I have to do anything with them? No, they are self-sufficient and stress free. We then shut the glasshouse door and headed for the airport. Once I drive out the gate, I don't give the orchids a second thought, what happens, happens. We have since travelled quite a bit, for varying periods of time, with our daughter taking on the caretaker roll on each occasion and every time she suggests I should put more orchids out in the garden. A lot less work for her. The only instructions I left before our latest trip was, don't forget to fill the bird bath with water when you come up, and don't worry about the glasshouses, three weeks isn't very long.

We have always tried to time our trips away from mid-May to late June with late April being the earliest we have gone. We try not to go away during September, October

and November because of the local orchid shows here in Tasmania. The summer months can be problematic as well, with changeable weather and work commitments making extended trips away harder to organise.