

# THE AUSTRALIAN ORCHID FOUNDATION

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Essay Competition 2018

1<sup>st</sup> Prize Winner

by Karen Quinn

## **"My Greatest Orchid Disaster"** (Or my thoughts on how to avert one)

On the 14<sup>th</sup> May 2016 my world changed forever. My dear husband, Leon, passed away after a long journey with cancer. He was a much loved son, father, father in law, brother, stepfather, nephew, cousin, friend, and importantly, orchid lover and orchid judge of many years standing in Central Queensland. In addition he was a devoted owner of a very substantial orchid collection, which I would now immediately "inherit!" Greatest orchid disaster looming! What if I killed them all?

While Leon's passion was growing and breeding orchids, my "passion" has always been arts and crafts and on occasion I would help him "repot" the baby orchids, but my knowledge of how to care for orchids generally, was sadly lacking! In his final days I asked Leon what I was going to do with all the orchids. He uttered two significant words "Phone Bob!" A few weeks later I phoned Leon's long time orchid friend, Bob with a call for help! "I feel like I'm drowning, what am I to do with all the orchids? I think I may have a potential disaster on my hands!" Thanks to Bob's help, I am now "treading water" and slowly learning how to swim, the orchid way!

The next hurdle to overcome was to have the courage to join an orchid society and expose my ignorance. We had moved south to be closer to medical care in Brisbane and I didn't know many people in the local area. I went along to the Bribie Island Orchid Society. Thankfully, they hold monthly "New Growers" meetings where orchid growing problems, repotting and "all things orchid" are discussed in layman's terms.

The society also encourages new growers to bench their orchids for judging, in a Novice capacity. Oh dear, another challenge! I self-consciously brought in my first Cattleya early in 2017, and what delight – earned the Judges Choice trophy! The year ended on a high note for me when I won the Merv Anderson New Growers Memorial Shield Award – for Best New Grower of the Year!

Has my potential orchid disaster been avoided? Not yet, but there are some things that I have learnt along the way-

- Have a contingency plan! If you own a collection of orchids, talk about what to do with them should things turn "belly up." Ask questions! I now regret that I didn't ask Leon more about how he cared for the orchids. What fertiliser/s should I use? How should I deal with any virus that might appear? (One look at a book on the subject gave me sleepless nights.)
- Don't be intimidated by all the varied orchid names, classes, hybrids, mirror clones etc. I have also stuck mainly with the one type of orchid (Cattleyas) so that I can get to know as much as I can about them, before branching out to other types.
- Find an Orchid Society where you feel, welcomed, comfortable and not afraid to ask "ignorant" questions. Volunteer to help at shows so you can listen to the experts, other growers and gather snippets of information along the way. Focus on the flowers and "steer clear" of any political dynamics!
- Take notes and diarise any successes along the way to encourage yourself! Read publications such as Orchids Australia. OK most of it is "Greek" to me but there are the Cultural Notes with advice on growing orchids in different growing areas and conditions, which are very useful.

- Be prepared to become a sleuth of sorts! Over several days I noticed something was eating my orchid leaves. These were not small holes, but were large bites around the edges of the leaves. Evidence of something with very effective mandibles! Possums? Mice? Bugs? It was suggested that I patrol the greenhouse with a torch at night, and also to watch when the orchids were watered as an insect would “take flight.” No success. A few weeks later – a clue! My neighbour had large locust looking grasshoppers eating her bromeliads. Sure enough further extensive examinations revealed the well camouflaged culprits. Another potential disaster narrowly averted!

I have learnt that apart from becoming “addictive”, successful orchid growing can be very time consuming – there is always something that needs to be done. Repotting, weeding, and washing pots, spraying, a watering regime to perfect, pests and diseases to deal with and different views on sterilising tools.. But, the rewards are endless, too. The excitement when a magnificent flower opens or another earns recognition at a meeting boosts one along.

I feel closer to my dear husband when working with his precious orchids. I am carrying on his tradition. I am doing my level best to avoid an “orchid disaster” on my watch!