

THE AUSTRALIAN ORCHID FOUNDATION

Essay Competition 2018

3rd Prize Winner

By Sandra Rowcliffe

“My Greatest Orchid Disaster”

The catalyst to my interest in orchids developed from the day a Raffle Prize was delivered to my family home. I had just turned 14 years of age and my mother was fortunate to win the major prize at the Gladstone Orchid & Foliage Society Easter Show. The prize consisted of a large box of beautifully decorated candy Easter eggs and marshmallow rabbits and an exquisite flowering Cattleya Orchid, which was mauve in colour with a deeper coloured labellum and a strong fragrance, the name is unknown to me.

This prize also ignited another interest and that was I learnt cake decorating around 17 years of age and I commenced a full time cake decorating business which also included equipment sales and tutoring private classes and the Home Economic Students at a local high school. After my first son was born this business allowed me to work from home while my children were small and I did this for ten years. I also established the Gladstone Cake Decorators Association in the mid-80s. To this day I still make candy Easter eggs to sell at the markets, to individuals and for club raffles; I also bake and ice cakes especially around Christmas Time.

When I first married and had my own home and a small greenhouse every Easter I was one of the first visitors to the Orchid Show buying several plants each time, but sadly a majority did not survive to the following Easter. The main reason was that the greenhouse was built under a wide veranda with an eastern aspect and was sheeted with very thick fibreglass sheeting (the sheeting we got for free) which meant the plants were trying to survive in a low light situation with very poor airflow contributing to a range of diseases affecting my plants.

When I relocated to Rockhampton in 1996 I brought my surviving 30 orchid plants with me mainly Cattleyas and Dendrobium. Those plants relocated to three different addresses until my husband and I purchased a squash centre in February 2005 and Michael built me three small green houses to house my collection which now covered several genera – Cattleyas, Phalaenopsis, Dendrobiums, Vandas and Oncidiums. They were growing reasonably well but again I experienced problems due to cramped conditions and the lack of good air circulation causing many problems with diseases as well as the usual pests - Dendrobium Beetles, Cockroaches, Mice and Rats.

We owned the centre for nine years and during that time my collection grew but still there was a high amount of mortality in my orchids. Around 2010 friends urged me to join the Rockhampton Orchid Society Inc., with the prospect I would hopefully learn how to keep my orchids healthy and most essential alive.

I looked forward to the monthly New Growers Meetings and listened intently to how I could successfully care for my plants, one of the issues I was experiencing with my Phalaenopsis was rot and it was suggested I used a liquid copper fungicide which was ideal for treating fungal diseases. Well!!!! - when I noticed some of my Hard Cane Dendrobiums developing spots on their leaves they also got a good spray of the fungicide but sadly the results were disastrous with the plants aborting all of their leaves and I even lost a few plants. But that was not my biggest orchid disaster and I must admit I have made several disasters over the years as would most growers attest to.

One of those disasters happened when I re-potted my Oncidiums, my collection consisted about twenty plants, I planted them in a course orchid mix and due to our high temperatures and dry conditions I lost most of my plants, since then I have changed the medium to a mixture of 40/60 (peat mix), coconut husk and perlite and now have a very healthy Oncidium collection, with around 100 plants.

The next disaster occurred when I started repotting my Cattleyas, someone suggested I remove about a third of the roots, but!!!! - I cut them off horizontally taking the bottom third of the length of the roots, hence lots of plants died. I have since learnt how to correctly tidy up the roots and repot but it was a stupid error that still bothers me as I lost many beautiful plants. As a beginner I discovered it was imperative to ask questions but also to ask for clarification of the answers to ensure that you understand the instructions correctly, this in itself is awkward to most beginners as they don't always have the confidence to ask questions of the more experienced growers, but I found all were extremely willing to share their expertise.

After we sold the centre in February 2014 we bought a lovely home at Olive Estate, which is a rural estate about ten minutes north of Rockhampton. We have a nice size acre block which allowed me room for some large orchid houses and Michael built me four. The area where the orchid houses are situated experiences good winds meaning great air circulation in the greenhouses and they get full sun all day.

The largest is 8m x 8m and is sheeted with frosted white polycarbonate roofing and the majority of my collection lives there – Cattleyas, Hard Cane Dendrobiums, Grammatophyllums, Catesetums, Paphs., Prags., Phalaenopsis, Coelogne, Bulbophyllums, Cymbidums, Stanhopeas.

Another orchid house 12.5m x 3.6m sheeted in shade cloth houses my Vandas, Rhynchostylis, and Oncidiums as well as my large collection of tassel ferns. A third 7m x 6m houses my soft cane dendrobium kielies and other types of market sale plants, and my advanced soft canes hang outside under a mesh roof.

Probably the "biggest mistake" occurred just after we moved, I started repotting my 250 plants which then become 650 plants quickly and stupidly I kept them all to fill my bare greenhouse shelves, now my greenhouses are overflowing with multiple pots of the same plants. As consequence of this overcrowding it is a necessity when I repot that I keep one plant and the rest go into my sale plant greenhouse which I then sell at Shows or Markets.

My collection has now grown to over 1300 catalogued plants and nowadays I am buying plants for quality rather than quantity unlike when I first started like most of us do when the initial "Orchid Bug" bites and we are impatient to fill our greenhouses with anything and everything.

In the six years I have been a member of the Rockhampton Orchid Society I have been elevated from Novice to Advanced grower and I am currently in training to be an Orchid Judge. I still have the occasional pest or disease appear but now days I am more observant of these and treat my collection quickly to alleviate problems escalating. Even though I still have the occasional orchid death it is minimal compared to all the orchids I have sent previously to Orchid Heaven.

Being an Orchid Grower is both frustrating and satisfying, probably the biggest frustration is when plants flower prior to or just after shows, it is definitely a matter of luck having that special orchid flowering at its best in time for the shows and a chance of a prize. I find the most frustrating of all is no doubt Catesetums which only have about a weeks' flowering life, but they are also my favourite genera.