

Essay Competition 2019

Equal 2nd Prize Winner

How do my orchids survive while I'm away from home?

By Janice Robinson

GO AWAY, PLEASE!!!

We are sooooooooo looking forward to the moment when She climbs into that 4WD truck with her hubby and disappears on another Gray Nomad adventure. Good riddance and don't come back until September, we say! She drives us absolutely mad during the winter months if She's at home, poking and prodding us to no end. Watering us inappropriately. Feeding us inappropriately. Sometimes even repotting us---in the middle of winter, can you imagine!! We've heard of another similar person called "That Woman," but we reckon our She is much worse.



For some reason, She stresses out over us getting enough water while She is away in the winter. Never mind that during the colder months, many of us would rather just hibernate in blessed solitude with lovely dry feet. It's bad enough to be cold, but to be cold AND wet is the pits! Heaps more of us die from being too wet during the winter than too dry. You would think She might have worked that out by now, She has been attempting to grow orchids for over 20 years and still hasn't a clue! For awhile She could count on her neighbour to water us while She was away during the winter. She would give him specific written instructions on what to do. Not to water when it's raining. (We are all under cover during winter, which in itself causes problems. But we'll get to that later.) Only water every 10 days or so. Make sure to water in the morning, not in the afternoon, so our leaves have time to dry out before the night cold. That was working quite well until the neighbour found golf. So now he is rarely home during the winter, either. What did She do to cope?



Get her hubby to install a watering system that runs on timers. Picture this: Once a week, at exactly 10:00 am, you are jolted out of a winter slumber by a blast of icy cold water, pelting you unmercifully from all directions at a great rate of knots. Rain or shine, 10 a.m., three minutes of the “water board” treatment. If a rainy or cloudy day or a day with no breeze, we are still saturated by water at nightfall and have to face hours of arctic-like drafts blowing around the bush houses, further lowering the wind chill factor and making us susceptible to those horrible fungal diseases that lurk around every corner, just waiting for such an opportunity.

Speaking of fungal diseases, She heard recently that the way to treat these problems is to paint the infected area with a thick paste of Mancozeb instead of spraying the whole plant. In her typical unthinking fashion, She mixed up a batch straight away and went to work--not with any of the finesse that an artist might show with a fine paintbrush, but more like a house painter using one of those roller brushes! She reckoned this would be a good way to prevent further fungal issues while She is away. So now some of us are dying, not of fungal infection, but of suffocation since we can't breathe through all that Mancozeb! You can imagine the amount of Mancozeb paste required to treat several thousand orchids that are about to be subjected to three long months of the weekly 10 a.m. “water board” treatment! If She would leave the watering system turned completely off for those three winter months, we would probably fare much better. It's much easier to recuperate from dehydration than from weeks of hypothermia. (And who wants to drink Mancozeb runoff for three months, yuck!)

When She is home, after watering She goes around dabbing moisture out of our leaf apices with a paper towel to help avoid crown rot. When She is away, obviously She can't do that. One of her attempts to solve that dilemma is to cut up drink coasters and insert these bits between our leaves where water pools, the idea being the water will wick up the coaster away from the plant tissue. The theory might be good but in practical application, She can be somewhat heavy-handed in her placement of these coaster pieces. Specifically in the top of a Paph where a bud is forming in the sheath and She doesn't see it as She crams a coaster piece into the top of the plant. After all, She doesn't want the cardboard to be dislodged by the watering system, so it needs to be inserted quite firmly. Or so She reckons -- but then later wonders why She is getting deformed Paph flowers!

One of the other bright ideas She had to protect us from the elements while She is away was to have a big piece of marine-quality plastic made to cover one of the bush houses. She unrolls it over the top during the winter so that we stay dry during the cold rains. A good idea in theory. However, due to the angle of the sun during the winter, She hangs most of us up in that bush house quite close to the top of the plastic to get as much sunlight as possible. Which creates several problems. First, when the watering system starts up, only about a fourth of us get any water because the nozzles are so close to the hanging plants. The plants that are close to a nozzle get drenched; the rest of us barely get a bit of mist. But I suppose that could be seen as a good thing, since it means that not all of us run the risk of still being wet over night when the watering system has started up on a rainy or overcast day. The second problem is that when She is away during late winter, the sun can be so hot under that plastic that some of us roast, especially the ones near the top. One year She put one of her few good Cymbidiums that was in spike under the plastic and left it there the whole month of August. Was it any wonder that when She returned, all the buds had either dropped off or were yellow and dried up? Once the temperature goes over 25 degrees C on a sunny day, it is like an oven underneath that plastic and we all cook. No matter how congenial the neighbour is, She can't ask him to unroll the plastic when it's cold and rainy and roll it back up when it's sunny, even She wouldn't be game to ask him to do that! Definitely an unsolved problem.



Then there is the poly carb house. As this is the shadiest part of the yard, mostly Paphs reside here. She was given a heater several years ago and it works quite well during the colder months—when She is away, that is. When She's home, every time She opens the door in the winter, a cold blast of wind whooshes in and the temperature drops immediately.



God forbid She notices any bug damage in here, because She does not rest until She has found and killed the poor grasshopper or cricket responsible, even if that means bursting in at all hours of the night with her torch and spray---and letting all the heat out. The watering system in here is also a problem. There is never enough sun during the winter to evaporate the water off our leaves before night time after one or two minutes of watering. Even with three small fans running, water frequently stays on us longer than 24 hours with the resulting crown rot, fungal infection, etc. On the flip side, if She turns the watering system completely off in here while She is doing her Gray Nomad thing, the fans dry us out pretty severely as most of us are in smallish pots. She has big tubs of water underneath the benches, but it is not enough to keep the humidity up with both a heater and fans running 24/7. So this is another unsolved problem.

The warmer months are not quite so bad when She goes away. We have more time and higher temperatures in which to dry off before nightfall. She rolls up the plastic over the bush house and drops the hanging plants lower, so there is better coverage from the watering system and we don't roast. She sets the timers to more frequent intervals and so far there have been no malfunctions with this equipment.

No matter when She goes away, some of us are bound to suffer—but come to think of it, many of us suffer when She is home as well! She definitely has NOT found the perfect solution to caring for us properly while She is away for any length of time, no matter what time of the year it may be. At one point She told her hubby in frustration that She could not possibly be away from us again any longer than two weeks at a time, but that statement did not go over very well and had to be retracted rather quickly. We are only plants after all and “shouldn't rule their lives,” or so hubby declared rather crossly! So if you have any good ideas that She could use, please pass them along to her immediately!! Her orchids and her hubby would greatly appreciate it.