

Getting Young People Involved with Orchids: A Young Person's Perspective

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I first started growing orchids 17 years ago with my grandfather, who had been growing orchids for some time, previous to my commencement.

Within 17 years, one could complete an average of 3.9 bachelor-level degrees; raise a child to just shy of adulthood; or spend 6,209 hours at the gym (if attending once daily for one hour).

I use these examples, as there are twelve broad aspects of life that are universally important to young people: health, family, friends, love, purpose, passion, wellness, education, time, water, food, and sleep.

So, when considering getting young people involved with orchids, I believe it is crucial to ask how orchids serve these twelve aspects of life? Of course, orchids cannot satisfy them all.

However, if an individual is to invest the foundational years of their life into orchids, it would be necessary for some of these aspects to be at the very least, salient.

I was eight years old when I started growing orchids. I recall the beauty of these plants being the primary source of interest. I was also interested in the immense patience, care, investment, and knowledge needed to grow these plants.

Why orchids? This is a question I have asked myself more than once. In the beginning, orchids provided a platform for education and for family time with my grandfather. By 2007, I was a member of several orchid societies. Thus, orchids provided friends in the form of society members; purpose in the form of responsibility to care for my orchids; and a passion for learning about these plants that could not be tamed. So, when considering the twelve aspects above, orchid growing maps quite well.

By 2021, I had spoken at several national and international orchid events; earned full-judge status within the Australian Orchid Council (AOC) and the Australasian Native Orchid Society; received approximately 30 AOC awards; run a successful orchid nursery; and registered over 50 new orchid hybrids. I do not list these achievements to boost my ego, rather to highlight the level of my involvement within the orchid world. My personal experiences, thus supports the thoughts I will share throughout this essay.

This essay is just that. It is a collection of thoughts regarding the involvement of young people in orchid growing, and how this may be achieved.

I have chosen to concentrate on orchid growing and its associated activities. It is the aspect of the topic I feel most able to comment on. I am sure more versed individuals in conservation, botany, and photography will make valuable contributions regarding this question. This essay will attempt to discuss the following aspects of the orchid experience: orchid growing; the orchid community; and modern orchid involvement. For this essay, young people refer to those under the age of 30 years.

Growing Orchids

Most would be surprised just how many young people do grow orchids. Many of my friends from my schooling and university years do indeed grow orchids. However, most would consider their orchid growing as casual or in addition to a broader interest in horticulture.

I believe when we talk about orchid growing, we are mainly referring to orchid collecting. Orchid collecting indeed in 2021 is very much limited by three main factors: a lack of economic resources; a lack of space availability; and a lack of time availability.

With house prices, and the cost of living and general expenses increasing, economic resources may be stretched for some young people. Additionally, the cost of orchid growing can be quite high. First, you have to purchase the plants, potting mix, fertiliser, insecticides, fungicides... and the list goes on. Then you need somewhere to grow them. So, when young people are faced with the decision between the development of an extensive orchid collection, or saving for their first home, it is not surprising young people choose the latter.

However, suppose orchid growing is less about the quantity and quality of a collection, or the modern improvement of a growing structure, and more about the social community and journey of growing these spectacular ornamental plants. In the latter case, I think the economic sacrifice would be far more attractive to young people. Additionally, I do not believe that decreasing the commercial value of orchids would overcome this issue. More promising would be a change of orchid growing culture to focus less on the biggest and best. Also, develop more emphasis on the community-based sharing of knowledge and support, regarding the growing of these plants.

As those who already grow orchids may know, they can take up quite a bit of room. However, large growing spaces are not always necessary to grow orchids. With many young people opting for apartment-style living, I believe discussion around this way of growing could be used to attract many young people to the hobby. Societies should aim to identify individuals within memberships who grow orchids in small areas or balconies. Work with them and share this valuable knowledge. Also, orchid breeders can help combat this challenge by breeding compact plants that require less growing space. That way, young people will see that orchids can be grown even when space is lacking.

Now, the most challenging aspect of orchid growing for young people: time. Young people typically are studying, attending school or university, working, establishing relationships, travelling, attending social events, or combining several of these commitments.

Thus, there may not be much spare time. Hence, the orchid community needs to ask why young people's spare time should be devoted to orchids?

Again, if the twelve broad aspects of life are considered, we should be aiming to fulfil these in some way. I do not pretend to have all the answers to this aspect of the question. However, we need to improve our accessibility, inclusivity and modernise how we grow and sustain the orchid growing community.

The Orchid Community

When we talk about the orchid community, two main components come to mind: societies and shows/fairs.

Orchid societies are seen as the heart of the orchid community. They provide meeting points for like-minded people, and provide a platform for sharing plants, knowledge, and life experience. Societies typically conduct meetings, growers' groups, and collection visits, along with more conservation-based activities. Many young people are attracted to societies' practical aspects: such as cultural discussions, guest speakers, growers' groups, and collection visits. Thus, if we wish to attract more young people to societies, I believe it would be best to focus on improving and increasing the availability of such activities. For example, a hands-on de-flasking workshop at a member's residence on a Sunday afternoon would be far more attractive to most (not only young people), than a three-hour-long general meeting, on a Wednesday night in a community centre.

Yes, I am recommending we move away from traditional meetings. Young people who may be studying or working in casual employment do not have three hours to sacrifice on a weekday evening, to sit through a monthly, society-based rigmarole.

So, what could a modernised society aimed at attracting young people look like? Bi-monthly meetings held on a weekend, aimed to provide discussion, guest speakers, hands-on workshops, and the viewing of members collections. Indeed, these are some recommendations for consideration.

Lastly, we need to change our societies' cultural landscape. If we wish to attract more young people, it is not as simple as just removing financial reports, and changing a meeting time.

I have very much experienced ageism. This ideology that young people must grow many plants for many years. Do the hard yards, before they know anything about growing orchids, is not constructive. Nor will it aid in attracting young people to orchid growing. Further, the sometimes exclusive nature of orchid societies is also not attractive. We need to create communities that are passionate about all aspects of growing. There is a common ageism in the orchid-growing community, that it is a negative attribute if a younger grower has more knowledge or ability than an established grower.

Orchid shows/fairs are perceived as providing five main activities: orchid exhibition; orchid judging; selling of orchids; orchid based learning; and lastly, the recruitment of new society members. These events, I believe, can be very attractive to younger people. When I attend shows/fairs up and down the east coast of Australia, I often see many young people in attendance. However, I believe perhaps some of the issues explored above have a role in why these young people are not more involved at a society level.

Importantly, shows/fairs require enormous amounts of resources to execute. So, holding fewer events of larger size, could be a suitable alternative in the future. Think of the possibilities, if multiple societies combine their resources with commercial growers and with members alike. However, for smaller and rural societies alike, this may not be possible. Nonetheless, for metropolitan areas where many societies exist, this may be possible.

This event style could cater to many young people's interests: such as hands-on workshops, orchid buying, viewing exhibits, attending lectures, and getting to know other young people. Also, by pooling resources, more central venues may become more affordable.

This is something I have given much thought to. If young people are living in smaller homes, in more central suburbs, with less time, and with less disposable cash, then the answer is not to hold these events more often, on a smaller scale, further away from the central business district. Events that are larger, more collaborative, central and attractive to a range of interests seem much more like the indoor plant events. These indoor plant events have been very successful at attracting young people, and engaging them in that hobby. Again, this is a model for much thought and consideration.

Modern Orchid Involvement

An essential modern source of orchid involvement is social media. When social media and orchids were first discussed, I recall that many individuals believed we would be venturing into a period where virtual orchid societies would exist. Well, six or so years have passed now, and this never eventuated.

The main uses of social media from an orchid perspective are; advertisement, promotion, the sharing of pictures, and the sharing of resources. If used correctly, these uses could very well attract young people to be involved.

Private Facebook groups about the orchid world are the most popular medium of social media in this context. Many young people belong to these groups. Thus, the task is to inspire and support these young people to turn their social media presence into practical involvement in everything orchids.

However, I am not aware to date of any societies or individuals who have surveyed the young members of these groups to investigate if they are involved in more traditional orchid activities. If not, why not? This could indeed prove to be a very worthy exercise.

Again, I do not provide a blueprint on how this may be achieved. However, it is possible to use social media to get young people involved with orchids. We simply need to understand them better.

Conclusion

It may seem in concluding this essay that I have not offered an answer to the question. However, that is because the answer to getting young people involved with orchids is not isolated and simple. It requires all of us involved in the orchid growing community to think. Think about how we may need to evolve to include young people. My thoughts regarding orchid growing, the orchid community, and modern orchid involvement may not be the most correct or practical. Each aspect of orchid growing will vary contextually and geographically. Regardless, I do hope this essay has inspired positive and novel thinking that may indeed answer the question: how do we get young people involved with orchids?