

Getting Young People Involved with Orchids: Why I find growing orchids so rewarding.

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Many orchid societies across Australia are slowly declining in membership with the average age of members increasing. Who will follow in their footsteps to lead the next generation? But wait. There is still hope, as I have seen some young people fall in love with the hobby over the past few years. Is this a chance for the older generation to mentor someone who has unearthed a passion for orchids? Do young people have a desire to learn more?

As a young orchid grower, I know that I most certainly desire to obtain knowledge bestowed upon me. I have been exposed to orchids from a very young age. My mum grows orchids and is a judge. Therefore, I have always been surrounded by orchids.

Attending the club activities over the years and being exposed to a great diversity of orchids has sparked my interest. This is due to having a chance to see different species and hybrids of orchids, and asking questions about them with the members. However, I never understood the value of orchids until later years.

As I became older, I realised that there was more to orchids than I originally thought: species and hybrids being the major divide. From there, an interest arose. I began thinking about the implications of this. Originally, I had only been interested in orchids bearing large, showy flowers, such as *Phalaenopsis* for example. I started to realise that many other species and hybrids of orchids had their appeal. For instance, I now am interested in unusual orchids, such as *Bulbophyllums*.

This essay is about encouraging young people into orchids. Therefore, I am going to give you three reasons as to why I enjoy orchids.

Firstly, the social environment that is established within the orchid clubs is lovely. Having a sense of purpose through the meaningful connections we build with each other. Walking into the monthly meetings and wondering what type of orchids will be displayed. Playing the guessing game of who owns which orchid is fun. I am always welcomed when I arrive, even if it is mainly because I am then asked if I could help with carrying in orchids from cars.

If I want advice or mentorship, I can ask anyone. They are always willing to help. It's funny how often, when people talk about mentorship, they quickly think it is a one-sided relationship, with the barrier of age being the defining factor. This can feel especially true for mentoring relationships across generations, with the implication being that only older adults can mentor young people. Not vice-versa. However, people of all ages thrive when they can make meaningful connections with others. Also, never be afraid to ask questions. There is never a dumb question about orchids.

Secondly, every orchid produces its unique flower depending on the species or hybrid. With over twenty five thousand species of orchids, and a much larger number of hybrids, you are bound to find an orchid that you like. Some types of orchid bear flowers that are big and showy. Some are small and subtle. Others flower all year round, and some flower seasonally.

I personally like the small and subtle ones that bloom only when there has been a lot of rain, for example, *Bulbophyllum medusae*. However, I did not start out liking *Bulbophyllums*. I initially thought they were ugly and horrible flowers!

The first orchid I ever owned was a Phalaenopsis, when I was thirteen years old. I soon realised that our shade house was not suited for Phalaenopsis, and I had to find a new species or hybrid to like. Therefore, my second orchid was a Cattleya, and my interest has increased and diversified since then.

Once you find the type of orchid that you like, you begin to adapt and change how you grow orchids. When your collection is built up, you will have orchids that will flower at different times of the year, so your interest will be maintained. Also, if you are brave enough, you can enter your plant into competitions, when it is in flower. Everyone can look and understand why you have an interest in orchids. If you are lucky, you might even win prizes, which usually means you receive money to buy more orchids.

Lastly, the clubs are one big family. Especially for me, because everyone within the orchid club I am in, has watched me grow up. My parents first joined when I was a baby. For the last twenty one years, I have always been involved somehow. I look up to the members as the grandparents that I never had. I respect their knowledge and their passion for orchids. I hope to share the same knowledge and passion with my children (when I have some).

The culture that arises from the clubs is always one that is healthy to bring children to. The members love seeing new members joining the club, and enjoy sharing their knowledge on how to grow orchids. This is especially relevant to the last fifteen months, where so many grandparents have not visited family.

However, you do not have to join a club if you want to grow orchids. But it is easier to obtain and learn about orchids, if you are part of a club.

The question I get asked frequently is: if I did not grow orchids, would I be interested in them? My answer is yes. I believe I would. Orchids are so easy to grow in Darwin. There are native orchids that grow within the Northern Territory. I have seen them in native settings, and this helps to increase interest from there. The variety of orchids is just so exciting. Many genera make me want to try each, and see which ones I can grow and flower.

I hope this essay has enlightened you, on why orchids are not just for the older generation, and can be for the young.