

THE FUTURE OF ORCHID SCIENCE & SOCIETIES

By Brooke Johnstone



In memory of Ron Greinke, whose support and encouragement in my role as editor for the Ipswich Orchid Society, inspired me to write this essay. Orchid societies need more people like Ron, who are willing to give young people a chance and foster the next generation of growers.

THE AUSTRALIAN ORCHID FOUNDATION

ESSAY SUBMISSION

Topic: Getting young people involved with orchids

My Journey

Ahead of my first university exam; I was practising the art of procrastination. I was strolling through my local Coles one day, when a bright purple flower caught my eye. This flower was so beautiful and delicate. I felt it just had to come home with me. So back to campus it came, and found itself a spot on the windowsill of my tiny dorm room. This small but stunning little plant brought a sense of life to my otherwise boring and cramped accommodation.

A couple of months go by, and sadly I found my gorgeous little flower began to wither. The leaves grew wrinkly and dull, dropping off one by one. Finally, nothing was left, but a pot of mushy roots. I was devastated to have killed something so beautiful.

Determined to do better, off to Coles I went to find a new plant, and try again. This time I chose a white flower, and figured I would put a few of those new uni skills to good use. By spending a little time researching my new plant, I learnt it was a *Phalaenopsis* orchid. They did not like the cold or sitting in water. With that in mind, my orchid seemed to be doing a lot better.

Jump a month down the track, on another Coles run, I spot a new completely different type of orchid labelled a *Sarcochilus*. I could not control myself. Something about this orchid was even more beautiful and intriguing than the last. Again, I just needed to take it home with me. So on to my windowsill went the little pink *Sarcochilus*. It is just as I am writing this essay that I have come to realise that this little *Sarcochilus* was the plant that truly sparked my passion for orchids. It later becomes my favourite genus.

Looking back, my lack of self-control at buying this plant should have been a red flag as to what I was about to get myself in to. But being a young and naïve 18-year-old, I thought this would just be a couple of pretty plants for my windowsill. Now I'm five years down the track, with a 2.4 x 3 m shadehouse, a 2.5 x 5.6 m greenhouse, a degree in plant science, and a position on the committee of my local orchid society. I'm still young and naïve, struggling to juggle all of the above. Yet, somehow convincing myself that it's a great idea to order another half dozen flasks of orchids, and start my own breeding projects

How did I get here? The challenges I've faced, is the focus of this essay and it's a topic, which I personally find of great importance.

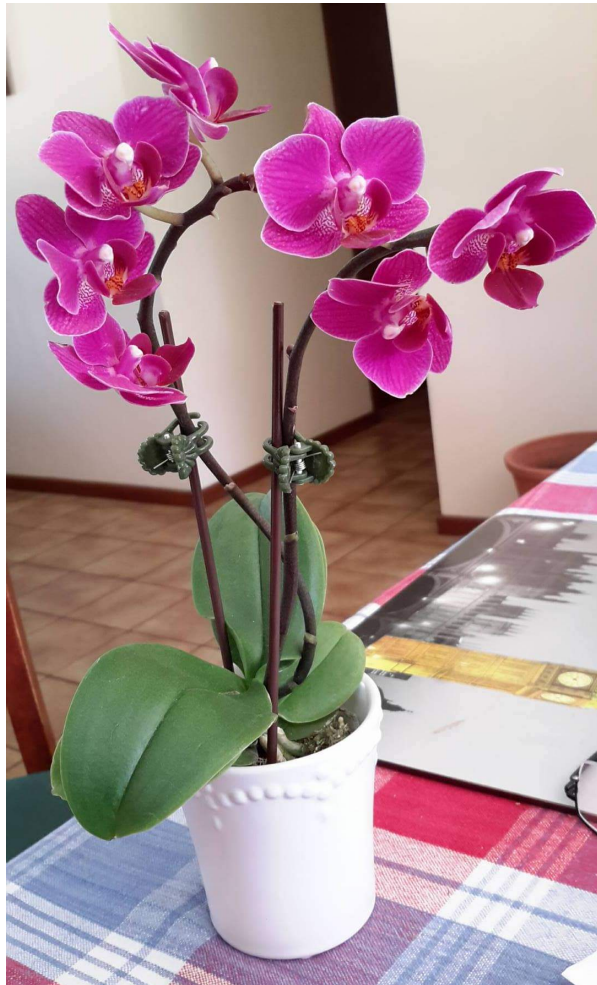
After bringing home that *sarcochilus*, my journey into the orchid world began in earnest. I attended markets and shows, slowly adding to my collection a range of *Cattleya*, *Phalaenopsis*, and even a few little *Tolumnias*. By the end of my first year at uni, my windowsill was full. My plants had overflowed into the common room areas. It was at this point, I realised my initial goal of transferring into Veterinary Science was pointless. I had found a new passion, and was determined to pursue it as my career.

The following year, I found myself accepted into a Bachelor of Agricultural Science, majoring in Plant Science. I continued to attend orchid shows across southeast Queensland.

There is one show in particular that will always be stuck in my mind. It was at the 2017 spring show of the Beaudesert Districts Orchid and Foliage Society. This was about a year after my orchid journey began. I met a man named Laurie Baxter presenting a potting demonstration. I had wanted to ask him a few questions as I had just purchased one of his *Phalaenopsis pulchra* (my first ever species orchid) from the plant sales section. I chatted to him after his presentation. He was the first grower to make me feel truly welcome, and encouraged me into the hobby. He gave me a couple of

dendrobium keikis. Laurie strongly suggested that I join the orchid society local to my area: The Ipswich Orchid Society.

A couple of weeks later, I attended the Ipswich Garden Spectacular. Again, I chatted with Laurie who directed me to a man named Dr Desmond Neuendorff. After a lot of excitement and encouragement, I was signed up as the youngest member of the society.



My first ever orchid - an unnamed miniature Phalaenopsis hybrid from Coles



The third orchid to join my collection - an unnamed Sarcocilus hybrid from Coles.

For a while, attending meetings was awkward and terrifying. I was surrounded by strangers, most of who belonged to an age group, with which I had nothing in common. As a young orchid grower, I was met with enthusiasm and encouragement, as well as criticism and ridicule. Some growers were helpful and supportive, providing useful advice. Others were arrogant and obnoxious, mocking my lack of knowledge.

I gradually gained experience, expanding my collection. The following year, I was nominated to take on the role as Editor for the orchid society. I was incredibly underprepared for this role. Certainly, I lacked not only the cultural knowledge, but also the time to properly balance this with my uni

responsibilities. However, I took on the Editor position anyway. While I struggled to figure it all out, it did offer me an opportunity to learn, and develop new knowledge and skills.

By the spring of 2018, my collection had grown too large. I needed somewhere bigger to house my orchids, so I convinced my mother into letting me set up my first shadehouse in her garden.

I had zero practical building skills. With the help of my partner and mother, who have both been incredibly supportive of my hobby, we dismantled a second hand shadehouse in Brisbane, and transported it back to Beaudesert. Setting the shadehouse back up, was going to take a fair bit of work. The promise of pizza for lunch, enticed a couple extra hands. By the end of September, I was able to have my first shadehouse set up, and ready for some new plants.

I almost immediately made an impulsive purchase of five flasks of Cattleyas. Although, I still had limited experience, these seedlings did surprisingly okay. They are currently sitting in my shadehouse awaiting their first flower.

After learning of my interest in purchasing flasks, I was invited to visit a local couple: Bill McNaught and Alison Hepworth. They specialised in growing toolumnias. During my visit, they were very encouraging and informative. Alison ran me through her technique for deflasking. During a tour of their shadehouses, Bill kept putting aside more and more orchids for me to take home. By the end of the visit, I had a box full of miniatures, including Chiloschista, Schoenorchis, Tolumnia, and several Tolumnia flasks. Their generosity has made the biggest contribution to the direction of my orchid collection. It sparked my interest in miniature species, and inspired my goal to breed, and flask my own orchids.

By 2020, my partner and I had been living together for just over a year. We agreed that I could finally build a shadehouse in our backyard. Being only renters, I was restricted to constructing something that was readily dismantled and moveable by two people. So I spent a while researching and drafting my design, planning its setup and pull down. After finally presenting it to my partner's family, they helped turn my dream into a reality. By the end of February, I had my new shadehouse set up and ready to go. That's when Covid-19 hit.



My 2.5 m wide x 3 m long shadehouse in the process of attaching shadecloth.

Shows, meetings, and all other society events were cancelled, as the country went into lockdown. Restrictions were placed on gatherings and events. I thought this would mean no more orchid purchases for a while. Soon, I found new sources for plants online; purchasing flasks from several sellers across Australia. This took quite a chunk out of my bank account. I decided to impose a rule on myself, allowing only the purchase of plants, with money made from selling plants.

With everyone stuck working from home, indoor plant prices began to soar, as people searched for ways to bring a little more life into their workspaces. I took advantage of this increased popularity, to propagate and sell Hoyas, to fund my orchid purchases.

By autumn of 2021, my plant collection had grown so rapidly that I was struggling to figure out how to manage the more cold-sensitive species over winter. I made the leap in to setting up a Sproutwell GardenPro greenhouse. It has still got a lot of kinks to iron out, before the heat of summer hits, but I am looking forward to this next step in my journey.

Now that brings me to today, where I am no longer the youngest member of my society. I am still excited, and hopeful to attract more young people into the world of orchids.

Why young people do not grow orchids

It is quite a task trying to promote a hobby that by nature, tends to present a lot of challenges to young people in today's society. There are many difficulties surrounding not only the time and money constraints of youth today, but also the space, lifestyle, and housing situation most young people find themselves in. Couple this, with the common stigma that orchids are a high maintenance, expensive, and difficult-to-grow plant. You will find less and less people are willing to up the hobby.

Time

A lack of time has been my number one challenge, throughout my orchid growing journey. It is something that I have struggled to balance between university, work, and other life events. Many established society members may not even realise the difficulties young people may face in creating such a balance. Many current members are of retirement age, having far more time available than their younger counterparts. Time presents several challenges to young orchid growers.

First of all, the main interaction within orchid societies is by in-person meetings, which young people may struggle, to find the time to attend. There is little, to no further interaction outside of meetings, such as online forums, or chatrooms.

Secondly, even if young people have the time available in their schedules, it may not coincide with the times when meetings are held. Many societies hold their general meetings on a weekday night. This time is often inconvenient for high school and university students, working late night shifts. Also, this time is likely to be inconvenient for young parents, who may need to care for their children.

A way to overcome these issues could be to incorporate more online interactions, where videos of meeting presentations could be uploaded for viewing later. Another way could be chatrooms, where members could communicate questions and answers, within their own suitable times.

Further time constraints to young growers, are the maintenance requirements of most mainstream orchid genera. When attending shows and general meetings (not for species or genera specific societies), there is quite an obvious focus on the large and showy *Cattleya*, *Dendrobium*, and *Oncidium* alliances. While these orchids are beautiful, they require a significant amount of time to maintain. Repotting, staking, tying and fertilising, all add up. In the long run, these large showy plants, are just too laboursome to maintain as part of a busy schedule. A way to get around these time constraints is to promote growing lower-maintenance orchids such as miniatures, and mounted plants.

Money

Orchids are expensive plants. Most young people are on a tight budget, so they may not see a big, showy, expensive *Cattleya* worth the asking price. But a lot of the time, these will be the only plants that young novices may recognise on the sales tables. Seedlings may come with a cheaper price tag, but without photos to show the flowers, young growers may not even consider purchasing them. A good idea I've noticed some sellers practising, is to attach photos to their trays or to individual pots, to catch the eye of potential buyers.

For those who are too impatient to wait 3-5 years for a seedling to flower, societies can promote miniature orchids, as a cheaper alternative. Due to their maturity at such a small size, you can

purchase them both in flask, or as 50 mm seedlings, and have flowers within 12 months. Another challenge that miniatures overcome, is the high cost of a setup to grow orchids. While Cattleyas and Dendrobiums often require large, expensive shadehouses to accommodate them, miniatures can easily be grown in small, cheap, bookshelf shadehouses, indoor mini greenhouses, and makeshift terrariums. This brings us on to the next big challenge for young orchid growers: space.

Space

Space is usually the most limiting factor to our collections. Regardless of whether you have only a small patio area, or a massive several hundred square metre shadehouse, we all find a way to fill it eventually.

When young people find themselves living in share house accommodation, at the parental home, or in tiny city units and apartments, growing orchids is going to seem impossible. This is especially when the most frequently benched plants are of the larger orchids. Again, marketing miniatures can be a great way to overcome this challenge. Increasing awareness and availability of miniature orchids will open up opportunities for young people to find a way to adapt the orchid hobby to their space-limited lifestyles.

Another way, which space can be a challenge, is the uncertainty or time frame in which it will be available. Even if young people find a way to develop an orchid collection in their available space, it may be an issue if they are in short term housing (e.g. university dorms), renting (requiring temporary setups), or living with parents (with future plans of moving out). This uncertainty leads to young people being cautious or hesitant to invest in any setups that they may have to give up, later down the track. This is yet another situation in which miniature orchids can be suitably adapted to a young person's lifestyle. Miniatures can be grown in portable setups, and are easy enough to pack up and transport, during a house move.

Why young orchid growers do not join societies

Even if young people are able to overcome the above challenges, there's still the issue of whether they even join a society. The difficulty with bringing young people into orchid societies is that societies are not structured well towards engaging young individuals.

The platforms most societies use to promote their shows are often aimed at middle- to late-aged individuals. Advertisements in newspapers, announcements over radio, posters on community noticeboards, and handing out flyers at local shopping centres, are all methods which will usually fail to reach a younger audience. Yet they are the most commonly used methods of promoting society shows. Societies need to adopt new methods of promotion, such as online marketing, if they wish to engage with a younger audience.

Another issue with the structure of societies is how the monthly general meeting are often run. Listening to the treasurer read out a financial report, then the secretary read out the month's correspondence, then the president run through a list of society notices, all gets rather boring. New young members may have no idea or care for the boring business side of meetings. They join to actually learn how to grow orchids. If you can convince them to attend a meeting, you really need to give them a reason to stay.

Meetings need to become more engaging by ensuring there is a planned presentation, or at least facilitate a topic of discussion for the night. One of the reasons I believe this is often overlooked is that too many of the older members meetings are a social event. The meeting is a way to catch up

with each other, and an excuse to get out of the house. But this often won't apply to young people as they have many other opportunities to socialise, and get out with others of their same age.

How to entice young people into growing orchids and joining societies

If you want more young people to grow orchids, then societies must start to recognise the need to adapt their approach to orchid growing, into a young-people-friendly hobby. Societies need to keep in mind the time, space, and monetary constraints young individuals face, and aim to promote orchids which fit within these constraints. I believe that benching more miniature species at shows, and marketing them in the sales area, will be the best way to achieve this goal.

Societies also need to start recognising why young people get into growing orchids. Take advantage of the attitude the youth of today; have towards the environment and conservation. With smaller living spaces and a disconnection from the environment, it is becoming increasingly popular for young people to combat boring and lifeless living spaces by "greening up" their homes with indoor plants. This presents the opportunity for societies to market orchids as an alternative to common foliage plants.

Another way to convince young people to try growing orchids is to highlight the mental health benefits often associated with growing plants. Today's youth are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of good mental health. Societies could help contribute to the mental wellbeing of young people in their local communities by introducing them to a hobby, which helps manage anxiety, depression, and other mental illness.

Conservation and preservation of species is also a topic many young people are concerned about. Most of them will not realise just how many orchid species are threatened or endangered within their state or regional area. Highlighting the role tertiary biology students could play in the preservation of a species could entice them into specialising and contributing to the world of orchid science. Engaging more citizen scientists could help fill the gaps in research funding.

Developing presentations and providing information aimed at a different style of orchid growing, would further increase the likelihood of young people joining the orchid hobby. There is endless advice available for orchid pests and diseases and cultural practices. However, there is very little advice available for growing under artificial lighting, setting up wardian cases, terrariums, and indoor greenhouses. These are topics that are very rarely discussed, and sometimes even ridiculed as "not really growing orchids". Encouraging these kinds of setups and putting together guides on how to manage them would greatly increase young people's success at growing and flowering orchids indoors.

Effectively utilising technology is another key step societies could take to increase participation of young people. Often, young people cannot afford the time or money to attend bus trips or monthly member meetings. A great way to still engage them is by conducting virtual tours. Members could photograph or video places and upload a guide for other members to browse in their own time. Presentations could be recorded and later viewed by those who were unable to make the monthly meetings.

Increasing publicity and community participation would also greatly benefit all societies regardless of age. Presenting potting demonstrations at local garden centres, or visiting schools and universities could be a great way to reach a wider audience and promote the hobby. Running photography competitions with goals such as a "who can photograph the most native species in a year?" could be a fun and interactive way of engaging the community. Participants could be rewarded by being

featured in a calendar, which could later be sold for fundraising for orchid research. Running a “design your own orchid” competition could be a great way to engage a range of ages by doing a colouring-in competition for children. That competition could be scaled up to a hybridisation project requiring older participants to justify size, shape, and colour with breeding backgrounds.

There are many improvements and suggestions societies could take on to increase the number of young growers. The key issue is whether they are willing to make the changes happen. It can be difficult for older members to accept change when things have been the same for so long. More so, if this change is proposed by people far younger and inexperienced.

Young people are the future of the orchid hobby. I would hope experienced growers would look forward to embracing younger members. Help them shape the world of orchid growing so that the hobby remains far into the future.