

AUSTRALIAN ORCHID FOUNDATION ESSAY COMPETITION 2022

1ST PRIZE WINNER

Managing an Orchid Addiction by *Brooke Johnstone*

Whether you're a casual generalist grower with a range of Dendrobiums, Cattleyas, and more, or a die-hard specialist growing only one genus, or a dedicated breeder with a collection of highly awarded plants, we all encounter the same issue at some point in our hobby. The inevitability of running out of space. Most people have a basic appreciation for a pretty orchid, and some will dip their toe in the waters of orchid growing, but for those of us who catch the orchid bug, we end up diving right into the deep end and often find ourselves up to our necks in a sea of plants we didn't really plan for. It starts off as a few plants here and there from a market, a family friend, or the odd show, but then quickly snowballs into nursery visits, lining up at shows at 7am, and don't get me started on the discovery of online ordering. We get whipped up in a frenzy of new purchases and before you know it, that little collection on your patio or windowsill has turned into an indoor jungle, or if you're lucky, a shadehouse (or multiple) in the backyard. So, for those of you caught up in the frenzy, here's a guide on how to get your addiction under control, and for those who have already been through it all, I hope you find this relatable.

Stage 1 – Denial – Buying more plants believing you can always make more space.

Convinced that you can always find the space, you keep buying and collecting every orchid you see. As a beginner, there was no discernment in the orchids I was collecting. I took on everything, from Cattleyas to Dendrobiums, *Phalaenopsis* and *Oncidiums*, *Cymbidiums* and *Vandas*. It was endless. You fail to see how fast the collection is growing until you're at the point where your current setup can no longer cater to the size of your collection. So you deny there's an issue and instead look to expanding your setup. You build another shadehouse, install another bench, clear another space for your rapidly growing assortment of plants.

You start finding the little niches where you can stuff another plant. It drives you to get inventive about how to use your rapidly shrinking space. Airspace? What a waste! In goes some hanging plants. Wallspace? Non-existent! It becomes a living wall of orchid mounts. Have some trees around the house? Brilliant! The orchids will love being mounted on them.

At some point though, you do start running out of places to fill. So then comes the inevitable shuffle and squish. You start inching plants closer together, trying to get that extra few centimetres to fit another pot on the bench. One at a time, so that it's not that noticeable. But eventually you get to a point where it's so crowded you can't lift a plant off the bench without knocking at least three more over. Now this is where we start running into some more obvious problems.

Overcrowding has some serious consequences on plant health. Bigger plants start shading smaller plants, and sunlight becomes a scarce resource. Plants are so close together, airflow is inhibited and nooks and crannies start to get damp and stuffy promoting fungal and bacterial disease. Pests like scale, mealy bug, slugs and snails have more place to hide. And your focus is spread thin across such a large collection that you don't have time to inspect every corner of your shadehouse for the nasties that are building up just out of sight. Eventually, you are forced to confront the fact that you are out of space, so if you're like me, you start the bargaining.

Stage 2 – Bargaining – Buying more plants with the proposal of selling another.

If you've gotten to the point where you're out of space, but you've just come across a great sale, or a plant that you've absolutely fallen in love with, you start to bargain with yourself (or maybe your partner who is more reasonable than yourself). “What if I get rid of that *Cattleya*?” or “I think I'd rather buy this orchid than keep the one sitting in the corner of the shadehouse doing nothing”. You start making trade-offs between the plants you want to buy and the ones you already have at home.

But how do you make those decisions? How do you choose which plant deserves to stay in the limited space available? Well, it depends on your approach to orchid growing. Are you someone logical looking to win as many ribbons as possible? Or are you just growing for personal enjoyment?

If you plan on being a serious show competitor and delving into the world of orchid breeding, you would select your plants very carefully based on their genetic qualities. Are they well shaped? Do they produce a large number of flowers? Have they been awarded? You look to prioritise the plants that are most likely going to place at a show and dispose of those that are weak growers or reluctant to flower.

If you are someone growing for personal enjoyment, you would choose to keep the plants that bring you the most joy. Are you someone who loves scented orchids? Then you would move on the ones with the weakest scent to buy ones that smell nicer. Do you want large or plentiful flowers? Then you sell off the small or less floriferous ones to make space for something showier.

I personally enjoy orchids that are more unique, and I love to challenge myself with something a little more difficult to grow. I started to find many of the Cattleyas and Dendrobiums a little boring so majority of them got the flick. I only kept a few favourite Cattleyas for their colours and patterns. I started to trade their space for genera such as *Sarcochilus*, *Chiloschista*, *Schoenorchis*, and *Tolumnia*. The benefit to switching to these smaller genera is that suddenly I could fit 20 plants or more in the same space I had previously only had five. This realisation was one of the driving factors to switching the direction of my collection towards miniatures.

Figuring out which orchids you want to specialise in, allows you to plan the growth of your collection at a more reasonable and manageable pace. You can move on to accepting your limitations and purchasing plants accordingly.

Stage 3 – Acceptance – Buying plants only if they are within your limitations .

Accepting that you can't keep every plant, and understanding the limitations of space, time, and environmental conditions, means that you can focus your attention on plants that will be more likely to bring a sense of satisfaction to your hobby. You become more selective in your buying habits and really evaluate if a plant is worth spending money on and if it truly belongs in your collection. It becomes easier to plan ahead for space requirements if you keep in mind the direction you wish to take your collection and only buy plants which fit these requirements.

I found miniature orchids were the solution to balancing my addiction with my limitation of space. I am able to both satisfy my need to expand upon the number and range of plants in my collection while maintaining it within the confines of my current setups. Choosing to specialise in miniatures allows me the freedom to grow a wide variety of genera, which can suit a broad range of environmental conditions, and produce a large array of unique colours and shapes. Miniature orchids can be show champions, as well as highly scented, and come with the extra benefit of maturing very quickly out of flask. Often, you can even find them flowering within their flasks. Another great benefit is that you can grow multiple miniature orchids into specimen size without taking up very much space. A miniature species, such as *Gomesa radicans*, can be grown to specimen size in far less space than that of a large species, such as *Cattleya guttata*. Miniature orchids are also easier to grow indoors for those with limited yard space. Artificial environments such as wardian cases, terrariums, and mini greenhouse cabinets are relatively easy to setup and provide an alternative direction for people wishing to get into the orchid hobby but lack the outdoor space to do so.

Conclusion.

Whether you're growing orchids in a 50m long shade tunnel, a small 3 x 2.5m shadehouse, a patio, or indoor terrarium, we all eventually suffer the same problem of space versus the addiction. It's a problem many future orchid growers will need to tackle as living costs rise and people cannot afford the large backyards traditional growers have had.

These days many people are forced to live in apartments, sharehouses, or move back in with parents. Growing options are limited to windowsill collections, terrariums, indoor setups and bookcase style shadehouses. As societies, we don't often teach newcomers how to build space efficient set-ups. How to make use of every niche and microclimate in a shadehouse. How to set up artificial lighting or plan a terrarium build. We rarely see the promotion of miniature orchids which would be better suited to today's lifestyles and space limitations.

It deters potential orchid growers if we send the message that they need these huge shadehouses in massive backyards in order to successfully grow orchids. It would be beneficial to the hobby to see orchid growing promoted more often as “how to grow orchids in your space” rather than “how to make space for your orchids”. Maybe then we would see more people getting into the orchid growing hobby.