

**AUSTRALIAN ORCHID FOUNDATION
ESSAY COMPETITION 2022**

EQUAL 2ND PRIZE WINNER

Managing an Orchid Addiction
by
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Yes, you can have too many orchids!

Having grown orchids for a number of years, there comes a time when you need to take a deep breath as you walk into your shadehouse and take stock of what you have before you. Some years down the track after you began growing orchids, it's hard to imagine your humble beginnings when you survey the many plants you now have in a crowded shadehouse.

As the bug bites, orchid collections often grow at remarkable rates, perhaps it is caused by a condition that's often referred to as "orchid fever". In the early years of the affliction, purchases can be made without much thought as to their cultural or housing requirements as we become captive to the thrall of a newfound hobby. Experience develops a more discerning eye from attending monthly meetings, orchid shows and displays. After a time, we understand why judges detail what they deem to be the ultimate virtues in form and colour, that growers should strive for and we look back on some of our initial purchases with reservations as to our choices.

There are lots of reasons why we added particular plants to our collections - ease of culture and flowering, colour combinations, flower form, a rarity as well as hybridising potential. Some growers favour hybrid orchids, others only species and then there are those growers who attempt to grow every orchid that takes their fancy. Sometimes we have a plant because it was given to us when we first joined a Society, by a knowledgeable grower who took us under their wing. We tend to keep these plants because they have sentimental meaning.

One of the pitfalls some growers fall into when they join an orchid society and become competitive in displaying plants at monthly meetings and shows, is purchasing more plants to make up for a lack of flowering plants within their collection. As they become more competitive, additional purchases are made to extend the genera grown, hoping to keep up with the yearly point score for benching.

Self-constraint can sorely be put to the test when attending an orchid fair or receiving a catalogue from a nursery when a myriad of flasks become almost as alluring as when we were children in a lolly shop. Flasks can quickly jump from compot to 50mm and then on to 100mm before you see the results of your endeavours. Be prepared for that handful of flasks to take up considerable space or have the willpower to sell unflowered seedlings. Better still share the joy of anticipation, by going in with some other orchid friends allowing each to spread the number of resulting plants.

A sure sign that your collection has reached a point where you need to seriously consider the number of plants being grown, is the quality of flowering or lack thereof. As you run out of bench space, plants are hung overhead and on walls to provide for your expanding collection and as time goes by the spacing between plants shrinks. A further expansion to the collection and benching extensions are attached reducing the walkways, making movement around the growing area harder at least but at times hazardous when carrying a tray of plants.

Reduced spacing diminishes air movement which reduces evaporation and lengthens the time it takes for pots to dry out, this can then lead to ongoing cultural problems.

Another consequence is the amount of light reaching plants, limiting their photosynthesis capability. Lack of light and air movement eventually shortens spike length, producing smaller, fewer and bunching flowers that fail to display themselves well. Then there are the spikes that would have produced something worthwhile if they only hadn't become distorted amongst the foliage of the plant growing alongside it.

Inevitably the lack of light, air movement and reduced evaporation will cause slower growth and a steady decline in the general health of your plants due to cultural and environmental factors. With plants too closely housed together the transmission of fungal/bacterial diseases is greatly accelerated and the observation of common pests such as thrip, mealybug and scale can go undetected until there are glaring signs of rapid decline that could have been prevented if they'd been noticed earlier.

Reduced spacing between plants has another unwanted consequence of making repotting a much more arduous task when the roots

of plants go wandering into adjacent pots. Lifting a pot can find its roots firmly embedded in numerous surrounding pots, making it difficult to retrieve the tangled web of roots without inflicting damage and setting the plant's growth back. When the task becomes a tedious and labourious process it can eventually lead to procrastination if sufficient time is unavailable to do the job properly. Putting off repotting can result in the plant's deterioration which may set the plant back for several seasons.

Eventually, there comes a time when it's essential to go through your orchid collection and do some culling. Not an easy job, though the rewards can be beneficial to you and your plants. Taking stock and getting your collection back to an orderly and manageable condition will require some hard decisions to be made. Where to begin and how?

Even if you're not actively adding to your collection, your shadehouse is still subject to crowding as the plants grow larger with age and you pot on. Sooner or later, you will find it necessary to reduce numbers to maintain healthy growth. The alternative is to build another shadehouse which is not an easy option for many suburban hobbyists. The challenge then, will be deciding which plants you can live without.

The task at hand will be simplified if you have an electronic record of the plants in your collection, either a database or spreadsheet that you record when you made purchases, their plant size and original cost. Knowing when you made a purchase and the size of the plant will allow you to judge the growth the plant has made over a period of time. Recording the flowering of the plant will allow you to assess the floriferousness of the plant within your conditions over a period of time. Reluctance to flower once grown to maturity may indicate you lack the light/ temperature conditions to successfully flower the plant. There may be some factors in your growing area that you have no control over or you're not willing to spend the money to modify.

You will need to assess the probability of flowering the plant as opposed to the space it occupies in your growing area, that a flowering plant might otherwise benefit from. The original cost of the plant will give you a starting point for the sales table, to give someone else the opportunity of seeing the plant in flower. (This has occurred with a number of plants only to see them benched several years later – daylight length and max/min temperatures being the key factors in their successful flowering.)

Dispose of those seedlings that you've hung onto for years hoping that they'll start to really grow. You know the ones I'm talking about – the ailing, weedy orchids that are not fit for sale and that we would not even give away. We maintain the vain hope that they will suddenly overcome their lagging progress, begin to thrive and go on to bloom. Sickly plants are the first to succumb to disease and threaten to infect others in your collection. They may be suffering because you did not have the correct conditions to grow them, or you have a seedling that didn't have the genetic stability to maintain growth.

It's hard enough growing healthy plants to maturity and flowering them, attempting to overcome natural selection is an inevitable sadness waiting to happen. It's a difficult task as the cost of the plants weigh on your mind but they'll soon fade from memory, once out of sight and in the bin. You will be surprised at how much better your collection will look without them. (Don't confuse “sickly” with slow growing species such as *Dendrobium speciosum* + hybrids, that can take over 7 years to flower from a 50mm seedling.)

Then there's the “nice plant, wrong place” group of plants. These are the plants that we bought at an orchid fair or nursery in the heat of a purchasing frenzy as we were drawn to them by the allure of their potential. Having moved it around the various micro-climates of your shadehouse, reality has taken hold as you watch the plant gradually going backwards. Unless you're willing to provide extra cooling or heating, the plant will be happier with someone who can provide for its needs.

Next, consider moving out any unknown orchids in your collection. Usually, these will be an unknown hybrid you purchased in the very early days of starting out or those whose label has been lost. Unknown orchids frustrate and challenge our human curiosity for the answer to “what is it?”. Without a name, you have just another pretty flower. You can display unknown orchids at your society meetings and shows but they are not eligible to receive flower quality awards i.e FCC, AM and HCC. Unknown orchids are useless in orchid hybridising as their background makeup is too clouded. However, unknown orchids with sentimental attachment or those with outstanding flowers of great appeal may justify a space in your collection. Many growers with unknown orchids hope that an experienced grower will be able to identify their plant. While there are exceptions, many orchid hybrids are too similar to be visually identified with certainty.

Duplicates are the next group of plants you should give up. Sometimes they're necessary for hybridising purposes or as a safety back-up for a rare or unusual cultivar. The majority are divisions that have made their way back into the shadehouse or indistinguishable siblings from a flask purchase. These should be marked with a uniquely coloured tag so you can spot them easily when you are looking for sales plants.

Over time, it is not unusual if you grow cymbidiums, cattleyas or Australian natives to end up with plants with flowers that are so much alike that they're nearly identical. A photographic catalogue of your plants can assist in selecting which plants to cull, though consideration should also be given to the frequency of blooming and longevity of flowering when making your cull list.

As plants become larger, they can become difficult to house, limiting light and air movement to surrounding plants. At some point as plants increase in size, you will need to assess whether it's of greater benefit to keep an outstanding specimen versus benching space for half a dozen smaller plants. A decision each grower needs to weigh up for themselves, taking into account the effort to transport these plants to shows and meetings. How large a specimen is sufficient to meet the criteria?

Dividing a large, overgrown plant will often invigorate the division, giving the newly repotted plant a new flowering burst as the growths are exposed to more air and light.

The easiest plants to cull are those that simply do not cut it, not all orchids are beautiful and having flowered it a second time to eliminate cultural aberration, there's only one place for an ugly plant – the bin. Don't pass the problem onto someone else. Then there are those you have lost interest in, as your tastes have evolved or your knowledge of judging standards makes you realise, they fall short of quality standards. Reducing your collection of orchids you have outgrown can make room for others that may invigorate your hobby. Every grower has different tastes in orchids and a well grown but unwanted plant may be someone else's treasure.

Every collection needs to be reviewed as time goes by, the goal for each grower should be to accumulate a collection that provides the grower with the joy of growing healthy, quality orchids. Periodically refreshing your collection can be beneficial in renewing your enthusiasm for growing your orchids to their potential and the joy of seeing a whole new generation of flowers. There are many reasons why we should be aware of “creeping redundancy” in our collection, the following are just a few.

- * Your preferences in genera, colour or style of flowers has changed.
- * Judging standards evolve over a period of time.
- * New cultivars appear from reworking crosses with superior forms of the parents.
- * New trends in hybridising result in changing colour combinations and variations in form.
- * New combinations of genera result in changing styles of flowers.

As the passion for orchid growing bites deep, our vision of what our shadehouse once looked like can become clouded as we “can no longer see the forest for the trees”.

I was recently reminded of what my shadehouse once resembled when I visited a grower whose plants were well spaced and organised into logical cultural micro-climates with lots of light reaching all the plants. A good display of flowers was on show with more spikes on the way. Moving around the growing area was unrestricted and was a sure sign of the grower's judicious plant selection. They were obviously happy with many showing signs of good root development, with a flush of new growths indicating a well-balanced growing environment.

I came away with the thought that more is often not better, when plant quality suffers as a consequence. If you can't devote the time to maintain the plants in your collection, the tasks required can become so onerous that in time plants will deteriorate from the lack of attention to detail. Adding new plants to your collection feeds your joy of growing orchids until there comes a tipping point when eventually reality strikes. You're so wrapped up in the joy of your hobby until practicality forces you to realise that maintaining a crowded collection is conditional on your health, the weather and other commitments in your life.

Probably the best advice I can give would be to find what grows well for you in your conditions and give it the space that it deserves, to do justice to the plant's potential. Seeing a healthy, well-flowered plant is the greatest satisfaction that your hobby can provide. The key to growing orchids well is observation and an over-populated shadehouse makes this so much harder a task.

Ask yourself, will your next purchase fit into your shadehouse? More importantly, can you devote the time and effort to see it grow and bloom to satisfy your joy of growing orchids.

END NOTE

For anyone with a sizeable collection, the last two years have been difficult with many shows and monthly meetings being cancelled due to COVID and no sales tables to sell excess plants. With plants still needing to be divided and repotted the addition of new divisions has further reduced the spacing in shadehouses. For some, it has meant creating temporary overflow areas where plants can be housed under less-than-ideal conditions until the resumption of sales. Hopefully, we'll see a return to normal soon and you can begin rejuvenating your collection by undertaking some of the ideas outlined in this article.