

What Sparked Your Interest in Orchids?

Cliff Courtin Urraween Qld 4655

In the early 1980s, Melbourne was a city of brisk winters and warm-hearted gardens. I lived in a modest weatherboard home nestled in the leafy suburb of Glen Waverley, where my garden was my sanctuary. Life had a gentle rhythm back then—weekday routines gave way to slow weekends, and I would spend hours among my roses, camellias, and rhododendrons, hands deep in soil, pruning shears never far from reach. My garden, awash in delicate pastels and rich reds, was a canvas of life and colour, each petal a brushstroke of contentment.

My love affair with plants was already well rooted by then. The velvety blush of a camellia in winter, the way a rose opened at dawn as if whispering secrets to the sun—these were the simple, profound pleasures that shaped my days. The garden was not merely a hobby; it was a quiet conversation with nature, a grounding presence in an ever-changing world. But something was about to shift, and it would come, unexpectedly, one spring afternoon during a casual visit to a nursery in Springvale.

Garden World was a place I frequented often. It was more than a nursery—it was a wonderland for anyone with a green thumb. Rows of ornamental trees, trays of annuals, and displays of terracotta pots stretched out beneath shade cloths. The scent of damp soil mixed with floral perfumes in the air. I remember walking slowly past a row of bromeliads when something caught my eye. It stopped me in my tracks—a cymbidium orchid.

It was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

The flower spikes were tall and arching, cascading with blooms that shimmered with a golden hue tinged with apricot and deep red throats. There was something undeniably regal about it, as if the plant had been plucked from a royal conservatory. It wasn't a loud flower—it didn't demand attention with flamboyance like some exotic tropical—but its beauty was refined, elegant, and quietly powerful.

I had never owned an orchid before. I'd heard they were temperamental, the sort of plant that demanded patience and a very particular sort of care. But I couldn't resist. That cymbidium came home with me, nestled in the passenger seat as if it were a delicate guest.

Once home, I gave it the best spot in the backyard—dappled morning light, protection from harsh afternoon sun, and plenty of fresh air. I read everything I could about orchids, often staying up late with books borrowed from the local library. I learned about fertilisers, light levels, how to split and repot, and the mysteries of dormant periods. I even gave the orchid a name: Celeste.

Celeste became more than just a plant—she was the beginning of something. With her bloomed a new obsession, and I found myself frequenting other nurseries across Melbourne. I remember driving out to Mt Evelyn one Saturday, where a quiet family-run nursery sold orchids tucked in a shade house behind rows of hydrangeas. There, I met an elderly grower named Bill who introduced me to miniature cymbidiums with flowers as pale as moonlight and foliage like cascading waterfalls.

"Watch the leaves," Bill told me. "They'll tell you everything you need to know."

Before long, my collection of cymbidiums began to multiply. What started as one plant became five, then twenty, and eventually over one hundred, all carefully labelled, spaced, and nurtured in every spare corner of my garden. I built a small shade house in the backyard using old timber and shade cloth, which quickly became my favourite place to be. In the early morning hours, steam would rise from the damp paving stones, and the cymbidiums would glisten with dew like they had been kissed by mist.

I began entering local garden club shows, often placing in the top three for best bloom or foliage. I met fellow enthusiasts—kind, passionate folks who spoke about plants like poets speak of love. I remember one woman, Margaret, who shared with me a prized hybrid of hers in exchange for one of mine. We stayed in touch for years, swapping stories and photos through email.

Despite suggestions from fellow growers to explore other genera, I remained faithful to cymbidiums. Their variety alone was mesmerising—green ones with burgundy speckles, pure whites that glowed at dusk, and fiery reds that looked ablaze in the sun. I did try a dendrobium once, but Melbourne's chill didn't agree with it. It withered quietly, and I let it go without much protest. Cymbidiums were my chosen path.

At the same time as my own orchid journey was taking root, something unexpected and beautiful unfolded within my family—my stepbrother Ray, who lived across town in Epping, also developed a fascination with cymbidiums. It was as if our shared interest bloomed in parallel, like two orchid spikes growing in different corners of a garden but destined to arch toward each other in the end.

Ray, a meticulous man with a sharp mind and a builder's precision, had always been hands-on and curious. Once the orchid bug bit him, he was hooked. He joined the Diamond Valley Orchid Society, one of the more established groups near his home, hoping to learn everything he could from seasoned growers. But as he later confessed to me over a cup of tea, it wasn't the right fit. "Too much talk about bus trips and sausage sizzles," he had chuckled. "Not enough about blooming cycles or fungal rot." While many find joy in the social fabric of clubs, Ray was drawn more to the solitude and science of cultivation. Disenchanted, he left the society and carved his own path.

Rather than give up, Ray threw himself into self-guided study. He devoured books, scribbled notes in the margins, and became a regular at several Melbourne nurseries, where he chatted with growers and asked probing questions. He experimented boldly—adjusting shade, trying out new potting mixes and fertilisers, testing watering frequencies with almost clinical precision. And it paid off.

What brought us even closer than family ties, was the deep bond forged through orchids. We would talk for hours on the phone, exchanging tips, debating fertiliser blends, and sometimes even naming our new acquisitions together. On weekends, I'd drive to Epping with a carload of plants to swap or admire, and Ray would greet me with excitement in his eyes and a mug of strong coffee in hand.

His backyard became a wonderland. Ray used his building skills to craft an absolutely breathtaking shade house—arched timber beams, soft polycarbonate roofing, automated misting, and tiered benching designed with almost architectural elegance. Stepping into his shade house was like walking into a sanctuary. The scent of hundreds of blooming cymbidiums filled the air with a sweet, earthy perfume. The blooms—reds, yellows, greens, and whites—hung like chandeliers, and the filtered sunlight danced across the glossy leaves. Visitors were left in awe, and I'd often joke that Ray's orchids were ready for a Vogue spread.

As our collections grew, so did our friendship. The love we shared for orchids transcended the usual dynamics of siblings. There was a deep, unspoken understanding between us—how a flower could brighten your day, how a dying leaf could keep you up at night, how the thrill of a new spike could make you feel like a kid again. It wasn't just about the plants. It was about having someone who understood exactly why they mattered so much.

Sadly, Ray's journey was cut short. Cancer came quietly at first, and then all at once. He fought with the same determination he brought to his orchids, but in the end, it was a battle he couldn't win. As his health declined, he could no longer care for his beloved plants. It was one of the hardest days of my life when he asked me to take some of his favourites—orchids he had nurtured for years, each with a name and a story.

I brought them home with care, placing them gently into my own shade house, where they continue to thrive. Every time I see them bloom, I see Ray—his passion, his curiosity, and the love we shared. And in that way, he is still here with me, woven into every petal, leaf, and root.

Life moved on. Jobs changed, seasons passed. But my cymbidiums remained constant, a familiar joy in a sometimes uncertain world. Then, in the early 2000s, I made a significant move. Seeking a warmer, quieter lifestyle, I relocated to Hervey Bay in Queensland. The transition was jarring at first—the sun stronger, the light sharper, and the growing conditions unlike anything I had known.

For a time, I hesitated. Would my beloved cymbidiums fare well here? Could they adapt to this coastal warmth? Some did, but many began to show signs of stress—their foliage scorched, flower spikes stunted. I was heartbroken but curious. What if this new climate, so different from Melbourne's, could open doors to other kinds of orchids?

So, I dipped my toe in again.

At a roadside nursery near Maryborough, I bought a dendrobium—just to try again. This one thrived. Its cane-like stems burst with life, and within a season, it rewarded me with a flush of lavender blooms so vivid they looked surreal against the green Queensland backdrop. That was the spark I needed. The gateway opened, and I stepped through it with glee.

Soon followed cattleyas, their flamboyant ruffles and bold colours unlike anything I had grown. Then came vandas in suspended baskets, their roots dangling freely in the tropical air like dancers in mid-performance. Phalaenopsis lined my verandah with grace, and I even managed to raise a few oncidiums, their dancing-lady blooms adding whimsy to the mix.

I joined the Hervey Bay Orchid Society not long after. Nervously at first—I wasn't sure how I'd fit in, being relatively new to the genera and the region. But I needn't have worried. The community was welcoming, with members eager to share knowledge and stories over morning tea and sponge cake. I met Gwen, an expert in vandas, who gave me tips on root misting and flowering cycles, and Ron, a retired electrician, who helped me wire up a new shade house system with fans and misting nozzles.

Among the many orchids that have passed through my care over the years, one will always hold a special place in my heart—a *Psychopsis papilio*, often called the "Butterfly Orchid" for its extraordinary, winged appearance. Unlike any orchid I had ever grown, this plant was a true oddity—a graceful enigma of nature. I had acquired it as a small seedling from a specialty grower at a field day in Bundaberg, tucked away among trays of phalaenopsis and cattleya cuttings. Something about it—its tiny leaves, the promise of something rare—called to me.

Psychopsis are not the easiest orchids to cultivate. They require patience, stable conditions, and a careful touch. I placed the seedling in a well-drained bark and perlite mix, housed it in a lightly shaded corner of my shade house where airflow was constant, and misted it gently each morning. It grew slowly at first, almost frustratingly so, like a hesitant artist unsure of its canvas. But I was patient. Month by month, the pseudobulbs fattened, the leaves stretched and strengthened, and finally, after two years of attentive care, the first bloom spike emerged.

And what a bloom it was.

The flower unfurled like a theatrical curtain on opening night—a breathtaking marvel with broad, patterned dorsal sepals and sweeping, antenna-like petals that fluttered with the slightest breeze. Rich golds and chestnut browns painted its surface in intricate patterns, and the lip danced like a butterfly in flight. No two blooms were alike, and the plant would bloom successively on the same spike for months, offering new surprises each time.

I had entered shows before, but this time, I knew I had something special. When the Hervey Bay Orchid Society's annual show came around, I polished the leaves to a gentle sheen, supported the flower spike with a slender stake wrapped in green raffia, and carefully transported the plant in a padded crate, my heart in my throat with every bump on the road.

On the day of judging, the *Psychopsis* sat quietly in its allocated spot, looking almost surreal among the more traditional cattleyas and dendrobiums. But it didn't stay quiet for long. As visitors began to

arrive, a gentle murmur of fascination followed. I caught snippets of admiration — “I’ve never seen one like this,” “Is that even real?” “It looks like it might fly away!” It drew people in like moths to light.

When the results were posted, I saw it—first place, right there beside my plant’s tag. My heart swelled. I had grown that orchid from infancy, nurtured it through Queensland’s heat, shielded it from storms, and now here it was, standing proudly at the front of the bench, a ribbon fluttering just beneath its blooming wings. I’ll never forget the joy of watching visitors pause in front of it, lean in to admire the details, and walk away smiling. It wasn’t just about winning—it was about sharing something rare and beautiful with others, and knowing that my efforts had brought that moment into being.

That Psychopsis now lives in a slightly elevated spot in my garden, where I see it every morning. It still blooms, a little less frequently now, but with the same mystique. And every time it opens a new flower, I am transported back to that show hall, to the warmth of shared admiration, and to the feeling that, in a small but meaningful way, I had helped something truly extraordinary take flight.

Through society shows, benching nights, and field trips to nearby growers, my passion expanded. I was no longer just a cymbidium grower—I had become an orchid enthusiast in the fullest sense. The diversity of forms, colours, scents, and growing techniques was intoxicating. Orchids became more than a hobby—they became a way of life.

At one of the orchid shows, I met Grahame and Margaret from Orchidaceous Supplies—a stall brimming with everything an orchid grower could dream of. Margaret, delightfully chatty and welcoming, struck up conversation, and soon we bonded over our shared enthusiasm. They eventually invited me to help sell their products at some shows, which I gladly did, learning about growing media, fertilisers, and pots—sometimes by using them myself. Speaking with countless growers during those events enriched my own knowledge, and to this day, my friendship with Margaret and Grahame remains strong, rooted in orchids and nurtured by years of shared experience.

For a time, the Hervey Bay Orchid Society offered a comfortable place for me to grow my knowledge and connect with fellow enthusiasts. There was camaraderie, tea and sponge cake, and the joy of walking into a hall filled with the heady scent of orchids in bloom. I valued those early experiences, especially when I was still finding my feet in a new climate and learning about different orchid genera.

But as months turned into years, a subtle shift began to unsettle that comfort.

I started to notice a certain undercurrent within the group—one that didn’t sit easily with me. Meetings, which I had once looked forward to, began to feel less about orchids and more about personalities. There was a noticeable clique, a tight circle of long-time members who seemed more interested in whispered conversations, idle gossip, and who-was-doing-what than in the plants we all loved. I would sit quietly through moments of side chatter, hearing snippets of rumours, small town scandals, and personal judgments masked as concern. It wasn’t always malicious, but it was persistent—and disheartening.

I came to realise that I wasn’t alone in my discomfort. Others, too, seemed to shy away from that closed circle, sticking to the corners or slipping out quietly after meetings. And though I tried to look past it, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the society had drifted from its original purpose—to share, learn, and nurture a love for orchids.

Leaving the Hervey Bay Orchid Society opened the door for something better suited to my spirit. Eventually, my journey led me to Childers, a charming rural town with a slower pace, friendly locals, and a vibrant community spirit. There, I discovered the Childers and Isis District Orchid Society—a breath of fresh air in every sense. From the very first meeting, held in an old church hall, I felt a deep sense of belonging. It was filled with laughter, real conversations, and a genuine focus on orchids. It was like stepping into sunlight after a long shadow. The difference was night and day, and I knew I had found my true orchid family.

Joining the Childers and Isis District Orchid Society felt like coming home. There was a warmth and authenticity in the room, a refreshing contrast to the atmosphere I had previously experienced. People greeted me with genuine smiles, and conversations were less about who you were and more about what you grew and loved. It was here that I met two people who would become instrumental in my journey within the Society—Gloria and Sandra.

Gloria was the President at the time, a woman of presence and purpose. She was a firm hand on the helm—strong in character, unafraid to speak her mind, and unwavering in her commitment to fairness. She ruled with a sense of dignity and resolve, and while some may have considered her strict, those who paid close attention saw the integrity in her decisions. Gloria had a commanding way about her, but never domineering—more like a seasoned captain steering the ship through all-weather with steady hands. I admired her. Her devotion to the Society was evident in every action, and it quickly became clear that she carried the weight of leadership not for status, but for service.

Then there was Sandra—the Society's event coordinator and, in many ways, its heart. Sandra was tireless. She was the first to arrive and the last to leave, always bustling about with a clipboard in one hand and a kind word on her lips. Her nature was gracious and warm, the sort of person who made you feel seen and welcome without trying. She was helpful in the truest sense of the word—never overbearing, always patient, and incredibly organised. Sandra made my integration into the Society not just easy but joyful. She offered guidance, included me in event planning, and had a way of making even the most daunting tasks feel manageable with her calm assurance.

Over the years, I naturally gravitated toward Gloria, soaking in her leadership style, her principles, and her sharp understanding of both orchids and people. She took me under her wing—informally, but with unmistakable intent. I learned a great deal from her, not just about orchids, but about how to steer a group with vision, fairness, and fortitude. She saw something in me that I hadn't yet recognised in myself: the potential to lead.

It wasn't long before I began contributing more—helping organise meetings, setting up display tables, lending a hand at the Spring Shows, even editing little notes for the newsletter, and offering a cup of tea to newcomers. Bit by bit, my confidence grew, and my voice found its place within the club. Eventually, I was both surprised and honoured to be asked to take on two of the very roles Gloria had held with such grace—President and Editor - roles I accepted with humility and passion.

Following in her footsteps felt both daunting and deeply rewarding. I wanted to uphold her legacy while bringing my own spirit to the positions. Under her mentorship and with Sandra's unwavering support, I stepped into leadership with pride and purpose, determined to continue the culture of respect, fairness, passion, and inclusion that had made the Society so special to me from the very beginning.

As Club Editor, it gave me a chance to bring our members' voices and achievements to light through newsletters and stories. But it also opened up an entirely new creative avenue for me—one that beautifully married my love of orchids with a growing interest in digital design and storytelling. Among the various duties that came with the role, one stood out as both a challenge and a joy: producing the Society's annual calendar.

At first, I wasn't sure where to begin. I'd never used Adobe Photoshop before, and the idea of learning such a complex program from scratch was intimidating. But something about the project ignited my curiosity. I dove into tutorials, stayed up late watching online videos, experimenting with layers, fonts, and colour balance until my eyes blurred. I learned how to enhance a photo subtly without losing the authenticity of the bloom, how to align text cleanly, and how to create layouts that flowed seamlessly from month to month.

The photographs I used were my own—taken lovingly with a DSLR camera that had become almost as dear to me as my secateurs. I would wait for the perfect morning light, camera in hand, crouched beside a cymbidium or leaning over a vanda, trying to capture just the right angle. The dew, the sunlight, the delicate veining in each petal—they all told a story.

When the first glossy calendars rolled off the press, I remember the moment I held one in my hands. The cover shimmered slightly under the light, the colours vivid and true to life. January opened with a radiant *Cattleya* in full bloom, April featured a dainty *oncidium* caught in a beam of sunlight, and October offered the surreal beauty of a *Psychopsis papilio*—its butterfly-like bloom fluttering mid-page as though about to lift off.

The response was heart-warming. Members complimented the quality, proudly gifting the calendars to friends and family. I received high commendations from fellow clubs, and even casual visitors at our shows were eager to purchase a copy. For me, it was a source of quiet pride, a reflection of how far I'd come—from fumbling with Photoshop to producing a publication that did justice to the splendour of our blooms.

Beyond the blooms themselves, orchids have helped me grow personally. I've learned to listen more—both to people and to plants. I've become more patient, more observant, and more connected to the rhythm of nature. Through orchids, I've developed leadership skills, writing and computer skills, and even a newfound confidence in public speaking. Orchids have been, quite literally, life-changing.

Today, when I walk through my garden—now filled with all manner of orchids from tiny *masdevallias* to sprawling *dendrobiums*—I often pause to reflect on that very first *cymbidium* back in Melbourne. I still have a few, carefully acclimatised to this warmer climate, and each year they offer a gentle nod to my beginnings.

Orchids have taught me patience, resilience, and joy. They've led me to new friendships, to new towns, and to a sense of purpose I never anticipated. I've met lifelong friends at orchid shows, traded *keikis* with growers from as far as Cairns and Sydney, and even given talks at community centres about cultivation techniques and floral art.

I've seen members blossom under the encouragement of others, shy growers become confident speakers, and once-timid plants burst into bloom with the right care. The orchid world is not just about flowers—it's about connection, about finding something that anchors you in the present while letting your spirit grow.

And to think, it all began with one quiet *cymbidium* named Celeste.