

Essay 13

From Strawberries to Sarcs Daniel Coulton

It all began with a strawberry plant.

I was about eleven, just home from a friend's birthday party, when I discovered that my father had bought each of us kids a small plant. My two sisters ignored theirs — but for some reason, I didn't. I cared for it, watered it, watched it, even though it never gave much fruit. I still can't explain why I connected with that plant, but I did. And that quiet satisfaction of nurturing something, even something so humble, was the spark.

From strawberries came a mix of random garden plants, then a brief fascination with bonsai. I loved growing them, but lacked the eye and the patience required for real bonsai artistry. Still, I wasn't deterred. I knew I enjoyed cultivating things — I just hadn't found *the thing* yet.

One weekend, wandering the Berry markets on the NSW South Coast, I found myself in front of a table of orchids. I didn't even know what I was looking at — it was a cymbidium, I later realised but something about it caught my eye. It was \$25, a lot for a kid at the time, but I took it home. I gave it no special treatment, just the same quiet care I'd given that strawberry plant. And it grew.

Not long after, I found the Sutherland Shire Orchid Society and attended my first meeting in May 2005. It was auction night, and I went home with three more orchids. In June, I returned — and that's when everything truly changed. A kind and respected grower, Neville Roper, approached me and offered a selection of seedling orchids to help me get started. That generosity and encouragement was a turning point. I was hooked.

In September, I officially became a member of the society — a grand investment of \$2 — and entered my first orchid show. As the only junior, I won the class with the very same cymbidium I'd bought a year earlier. The thrill of exhibiting, of being part of something bigger, took root.

By mid-2006, I'd begun attending growing classes run by S.T. Ho, where I not only improved my skills but also met more experienced growers who welcomed and supported me. My collection passed 100 plants. I finally had a shadehouse built with the assistance of my Grandfather one school holidays, just 3 metres by 3 metres, but it felt like a palace.

In October of that year, I earned my first placing in an open class: second prize with a plant I'd bought at my very first meeting. It didn't matter that only a few plants were in the class — to me, it felt like I was making progress, becoming a real orchid grower in my own right.

Then, life took over.

Between 2014 and 2022, my focus shifted. I started a career, built a long-term relationship, and bought a home — each a milestone that required time, attention, and a different kind of care. During that period, orchids took a quiet step back in my life. The shadehouse stood still and very much neglected back at mum and dad's. The collection dwindled. It was, in a sense, a sabbatical, not an ending, but a pause.

But in 2022, the spark reignited — brighter than ever.

I joined Bankstown Orchid Society and jumped back into the world I'd missed. The joy of growing, of competing, of connecting with fellow orchid lovers came rushing back. This time, though, I returned with more perspective, a steadier hand, and a deeper appreciation for the plants and the people that shaped my early years in the hobby.

Looking back, it's remarkable how a strawberry plant led me here. What sparked my interest in orchids wasn't a single lightning-bolt moment, but a quiet series of steps — small connections, kind mentors, little triumphs, and even the wisdom of time away.

Today, my shadehouse is fuller than ever. My weekends often revolve around potting, repotting, and planning for the next show. And to all those who once asked me, "How did it all start?" — now you know.