

## Installing a Display for an Orchid Show

Text and Photos by PHIL WATT

When we visit shows, my wife Angela and I are, of course, looking for the Grand Champion orchid and which flowers won the big prizes. But we are also looking at the displays. What did the exhibitor do and how did they do it? Was their display sparse, with very few flowers? Or was it jam packed, with every inch taken up by flowers or foliage? Sometimes, no idea is too crazy or implausible.

After seeing a few shows, you might begin to think, as we did, about installing your own display. Of course, we are not talking about the spectacular displays that are highly expensive, with huge greenhouses and whole companies involved. The area covered by some of those displays is bigger than our small backyard! But installing a small, tabletop-size display is something many people can do.

If you have never been involved with a show, it is best to begin by entering plants in your local society's display. The individual display is an enormous task and shouldn't be your first experience at any show, as it was for my mom years ago. Instead, start small; enter a plant or two with the society. Did that work? Once you are familiar with the process, you can work up to your own table, or even, eventually, a bigger display.

The first rule is *don't plan your display as you install it at the show!* A successful display is not just a jumble of flowers. It has some sort of design and various

materials to accent your plants. Have a general idea of what you want to feature and where. For example, if you have twelve plants, four of which are quite big and the rest of which are small, how will you group the plants? And have a backup plan in case of disaster (e.g., broken spikes) on the way to the show!

In designing your display it is useful to understand both basic design principles and what the judges will be looking for. At many shows, American Orchid Society judges pick winners in various display categories, so knowing their standards is helpful. The CSA Gold Medals for Paphiopedilum or Cymbidium Displays focus on flower quality and culture rather than display design.

The AOS Judging Handbook allows 35 points for general arrangement, 35 points for quality of flowers, 20 points for variety and 10 points for labeling. The general arrangement or design of the display is judged using basic principles of design based on natural laws. These borrow the following concepts from art and architecture: Balance; contrast; dominance; color; proportion; rhythm; scale.

**Balance** refers to the "visual stability" of the display. Imagine a line down the center of the display. Does each side have a similar visual "weight?" Balance can mean symmetry, but often asymmetrical balance has greater appeal. When you consider balance in your display, think of sight lines from various viewing angles.

**Contrast** is achieved by placing opposite or unlike elements together. Long and short. Light and dark. Hot and cold color. But be careful. Too much contrast of too many elements is confusing.

**Dominance** refers to the features of a display that will dominate or draw the eye. Dominance can be one kind of element: A particular color; a different shape. But for something to be more effective, or dominant, other things must be less effective. Create a Focal Point and think of other plants and foliage as supporting that point.

Think about the judges. Entering a plant for CSA or AOS judging? Don't bury it in the display. Some judge or clerk is going to climb through your display to get that plant to be judged and put his foot in your miltonia. Place those important plants at a Focal Point. And think of the other plants and foliage as supporting that focal point.

**Color** is very important in display design. In some cases, a random hodgepodge of colors can be very appealing. For us, we group the flowers by



Photo courtesy Don Brown



This display by Seed Engei, top, shows a symmetrical balance. Round, creamy phalaenopsis contrast effectively with tall spikes of red flowers, middle. A mass of fuchsia cattleyas, bottom, dominates this display.

their color family: Reds and browns; yellows and oranges; pinks and lavenders. Foliage plants can separate color groups. Or, use color as contrast. One red plant

amidst a sea of white would be your focal point.

Good **proportion** is a pleasing variation of forms and colors. In your display, good proportion means nothing is too big and nothing is too small. When placing your orchids, don't jam them in. Orchids need space.

**Rhythm** means a dominant visual path through the display. Repetition can be used to create



White phalaenopsis flank a serene path through this display by Cal-Orchid, top left. Massed epidendrum in the Cal-Orchid display make a bright color statement, top right. Plants in this Orchids Royale display are in proportion to each other with sufficient space that individual flowers can be appreciated.

rhythm, such as using a repeating shape or color. In your display, this can be a walkway, a path, a water element, even a line of white phalaenopsis.

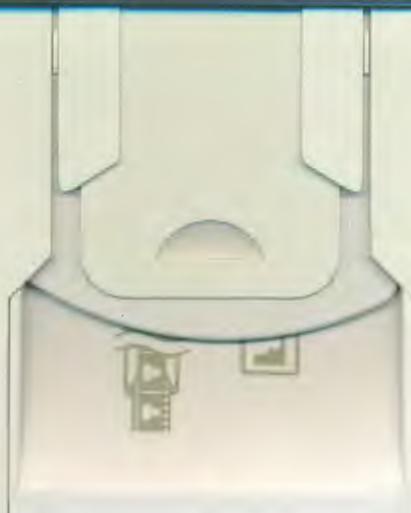
**Scale** adds interest to a display. Differences in height help draw the eye through the display and highlight different plants. An old tree or strategically placed branch works well. In our case, we use floral buckets and old containers hidden

by velvet.

Whatever your design, the orchids are the most important part of your display. Your display should have eye catching plants of the best flower quality you can manage. We have such a small collection that it would be easy to just grab everything in bloom and put it on the table. But we are very selective for quality and color.



The large scale of this staghorn fern topped with phalaenopsis, top, gives an eye-catching height to a display by Ventura Farms. While the vintage car in the Ventura Farms display, bottom, is beyond most exhibitors, smaller props would add interest to a smaller display.





When you select your plants, you should consider variety. AOS judges look for variety. But variety can be moderated by your intent. Are you installing a single genus or alliance? A particular species or group of hybrids? A certain color variation? All pendulous cymbidiums? Antique cymbidiums? All albinistic plants?

Judges will also look at your labeling, but that is not the only reason to label your plants. This part of a display is often overlooked, but it is very important. And think about your audience! We like to spell out the entire plant name. Labels should be large enough to read, but not so large that they dominate your display. Black with white text is visually nice and looks high tech. We usually use black ink on tan



Props, such as Cal-Orchid's wooden figure, top, help set the theme of a display. This large display, bottom, uses naturalistic and rustic materials such as rocks and bark that could look attractive on a smaller scale.

card stock from the craft store and make labels using our computer so they are neat and legible. Laminated labels won't run or curl if they get misted, but they can reflect the lights or a camera flash.

The use of props will determine the theme of your display. It often but not always reflects the show theme. Large displays may use impressive props, like a vintage car, a waterfall, or a structure. A modernistic display might use shiny materials and brushed chrome. One of my favorite types of prop is a rusty item or an old piece of machinery. We're also fans of anything from the Nineteenth Century. We like the old artifacts (real or fake) and the nod to those original growers and orchid hunters. Think Jules Verne and Charles Darwin, frigate ships and Wardian cases. Naturalistic displays can look like miniature landscapes. But the props should not overwhelm the flowers.

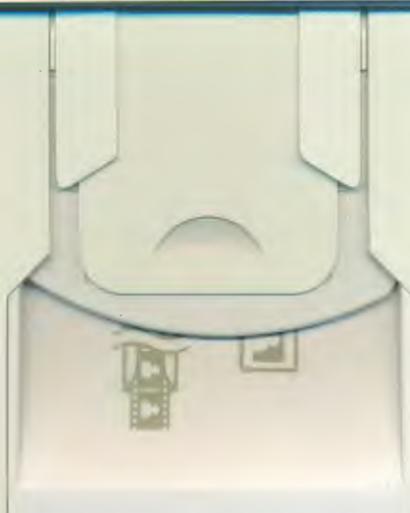
When designing your display, you should plan ahead for the materials you will use. It is important

to include a backdrop in your planning. A backdrop sets off the flowers and is great for photography. Neutral colors work best—black, olive, tan. We like fabric, burlap, bamboo, or live greenery as a backdrop. Depending on the location of your display, your backdrop could be someone else's display. How would a photo look against that? Consider bringing a screen or some other prop.

When we gather our materials before the show, we always bring our own lights even if the venue has a great lighting system. You never know where you might end up. A dark corner with no lighting is the last place you want your display. Rope



Paul Gripp's display of antique alba cymbidiums, top, shows variety on a common theme. Before the show, the author cleans away dried leaves and broken spikes, below left, then stages the display, below right.





lights are inexpensive, add accent, and brighten a dark corner.

Just as important as your props is the material you will use to hide your plastic pots. Green moss gives a pleasing, natural look. Spanish moss, which we grow, is useful for decorating the base of the plant and hiding our black, plastic pots. Fabric like velvet or burlap can be draped around the



Top: Baskets can be arranged at home for an easy installation, as this basket in Jim Sloniker's display. Middle left: The author uses a black backdrop to highlight flowers. Middle right: High quality flowers enhance any display. Bottom photos: Pots are wrapped in plastic bags before being buried in sand.

pots. If you are going to hide your pot by burying it in sand, be sure to protect your plant by putting a plastic bag around the pot first.

Decorations for your display are limited only by your imagination and what will look good with the plants. Pleasing ground cover includes bark, coir, fibre, peat, leaves, pine cones, magnolia leaves, pebbles, gravel, glass pebbles, decking, fabric, burlap.

We try to get our homework done before the show. Stake plants early and check them as the spikes grow. Before the show, we like to replace our stakes with stakes that we spray paint black. It's a small detail. But it's nice to have the stakes blend into our background or not appear at all in photos. We also replace the green twist-tie with a thin piece of ribbon tied in a bow.

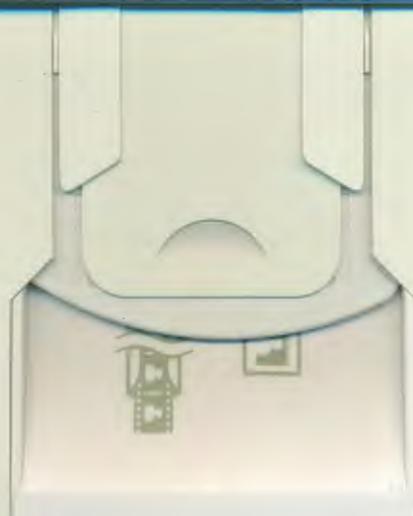
Clean plants of dead material and trim away unsightly leaves. Check for bugs. It's better for you to discover now that your spike is half eaten, rather than at the show. We like to clean the pot even though nobody will see it.

We like to stage our display in our garage prior to the show. We tape off the display size on the floor and test our plan. This is a good time to plan alternate plants in case one gets damaged on the way to the show.

Have a checklist of items to bring to the show.



Top: The empty display table. Middle: Buckets and tins add height and are hidden beneath the table covering. Bottom: Step back to assess plant placement before covering pots and "finishing" the display.



When you arrive at the venue, assemble the backdrop first. Install your props and place containers for differences in height. Lay cloth or burlap over the containers. Place the plants according to your plan. Hide the pots. Top-dress your plants with moss. Label the plants and make sure they are readable and facing forward.

We like to put in props to entertain the orchid spouses. But be careful of smaller or loose items at the edge of your display, particularly displays at table height. There have been many years when we would put some final touch in for decoration, like wine glasses or a small cut spike. They either disappeared or were in a different spot every time we came to check on our display.

Some growers use the basket technique for displays. We've seen this done successfully by a number of exhibitors. Prepare a large basket or baskets at home. Fill with several plants and a filler material, like Spanish moss. Then load the whole thing in your truck or car. Once you are

at the show, you can add the final touches, like tags, or reposition the plants depending on the situation. This method limits your design, but it is fast and convenient, and something to think about if your show or venue is far away.

Finally, be prepared to tear down your display at the end of the show. This goes very quickly. We like to have one of us stay with our display at all times so our plants don't get mixed in with anyone else's. Some growers who install the display on their own put their name and phone number on the pot with masking tape and permanent marker. Paper sleeves make for a quick teardown and protect the plants.

*Phil Watt is current President of the CSA and past president of the Santa Barbara Branch and the Orchid Society of Santa Barbara. With his wife, Angela, he is a repeat winner of the Harvey Bean Trophy for best small amateur display at the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show.*



The author and his wife used inexpensive kaleidoscopes to highlight the display's theme. The final accessory, the Harvey Bean Trophy, was added by the judges at the 2012 Santa Barbara International Orchid Show. 2009

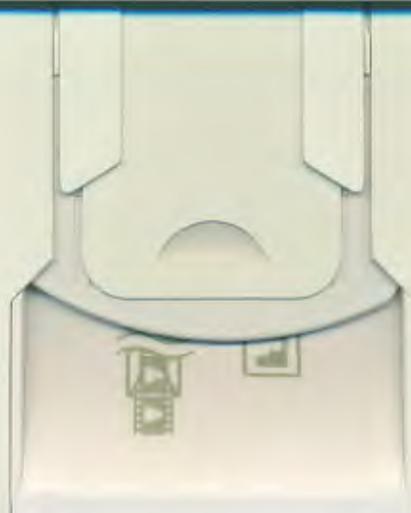




Photo courtesy Heidi Kirkpatrick

The Watt's 2009 display received both the Harvey Bean Trophy for best small amateur display and the Fred A. Stewart Trophy for best non-commercial display, any size.



Photo courtesy Arthur Pinkers for Santa Barbara International Orchid Show

The Watt's 2010 display received the Harvey Bean Trophy for best small amateur display and reflected the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show's theme of "Nature in Harmony."