



**St. Augustine Orchid Society**

[www.staugorchidsociety.org](http://www.staugorchidsociety.org)

## **Words of Wisdom for the Orchid Grower**

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@hotmail.com



1. Mom's Senior Picture  
What I wouldn't give to  
hear her voice.

Can't you just hear your mother giving you this advice, with an orchid twist?

**A Fool and His Money Are Soon Parted** – The orchid books often advise growers to learn about the needs of different types of orchids and select orchids that are most well suited for your growing conditions. Get real! Everyone has brought home a new and irresistible orchid and then struggled with making the plant thrive. Think of all those determined people trying to grow *Zygopetalums* in Florida. Sometimes you learn how to grow orchids by making cultural mistakes that end up teaching you what conditions that orchid requires... and sometimes you learn the definition of insanity by continuing to buy beautiful orchids that will never achieve their potential in your environment.



2. The Redland International Orchid Festival is a big East Coast show with over 50 orchid vendors from all over the world. Orchid shows are a great place to find that special orchid you have been coveting.



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**Caveat Emptor** – The best place to buy orchids is from a commercial orchid grower who actually grows his or her own orchids, and sells them at orchid society meetings, shows and often online on their own website or perhaps eBay. Commercial growers and hybridizers are a dwindling population that are an invaluable source of interesting plants, information and growing tips. Meet the orchid vendors, visit their nurseries, learn who has the healthiest plants and then buy from them. Everyone has bought plants from the grocery or big box stores or from strangers online and sometimes it works out well and sometimes not so much.



3. Those orchids always look so great in the exhibit. When you take the time to stake them, they really present themselves well. Problem is, who has the time?.

**Do as I Say, Not as I Do** –You spend so much time with your orchids, watering, repotting, admiring, why not make staking your orchids a part of your routine? Start staking when the buds are developing so the flower can be encouraged to orient itself to its best advantage. You want to lift and separate, sort of like a Playtex bra. Do not wait until the flowers are formed and say if only...



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**Grower Know Thyself** – Your watering habits and choice of potting mix (or lack thereof) are irreversibly intertwined. It may be true that that Aerangis will do best if it is grown mounted rather than potted. But if you get busy with your day job and only have time for watering once or twice a week, that mounted Aerangis will wish it had been potted with some mix that would hold a little moisture while you are toiling away for orchid money. Accept the time constraints life imposes on you and adjust your cultural conditions to accommodate that reality, your orchids will thank you!

**A Man Works from Sun to Sun, an Orchid Grower's Work Is Never Done** – Have you ever walked through your growing area and said everything has been repotted, everything is watered and fertilized, my new buds are staked, there are no weeds in the orchid pots or under the benches, and I've followed my preventative spray schedule?. Me neither.

**All Work and No Play Makes Jack a Dull Boy** – It is all worthwhile when you see the first bloom on that seedling or smell that fragrant orchid. Spend time puttering around in your growing area so you can enjoy the sight and smell of your orchids. Bring blooming orchids into the house so you can enjoy them longer.



4. The vanda houses at RF Orchids are always immaculate. You can learn a lot about how to



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grow orchids by just looking at how Robert Fuchs and Michael Coronado grow their plants.

**Cleanliness Is Next to Godliness** – Keep your growing area clean. Remove ferns, oxalis and other weeds from orchid pots before they take over and smother the orchid root system. Keep the area under the benches weed free to make sure pests cannot proliferate there. Spray the outside of the pots and under benches with one of the fungicides containing quaternary ammonium compounds periodically to sterilize and help keep diseases in check. Sterilize your cutting tools between plants to prevent spread of disease.

**All Good Things Must Come to an End** – Your orchid bloomed and it was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. Some flowers last longer than others, but all eventually will fade and it's time to remove the bloom spike. Most orchids enjoy a bit of a rest after blooming, let them recoup some of the energy they expended putting on that floral show. Keep them a bit drier. They will let you know when they are ready to start growing again when you start seeing those little green root tips.

**An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Cure** – Preventing disease is much better for you and your orchids than treating disease in your growing area. Watering your plants properly and providing enough air movement will prevent many diseases from occurring, which will help minimize the need for chemicals as well as your exposure to those chemicals while applying them. Keen observation of your orchids will keep you attuned to their health and the adequacy of the cultural conditions you provide them.

**A Stitch in Time Saves Nine** - Never put off until tomorrow what you should do today. If you are watering, do not think about what you have to do this afternoon, look at each plant as you water it. Stop when you see a problem. Put the watering wand down and move the plant to your triage area, then resume watering. When you are done, your plant will be sitting in a high profile place to remind you that you now must address whatever problem it has.

**You Gotta Be Cruel to Be Kind** – Remember when you used to visit the 50% off table to buy all the bloomed out or sick orchids? When you used to pot up all the back bulbs because you could not bear to throw them out? Eventually you tire of running an orchid infirmary and decide only to give bench space to healthy, vigorous plants that will bloom well for you. As you get more proficient in the fine art of culling, each plant you grow becomes a treasure rather than a liability.

**Do Not Be a Bull in a China Shop** – Want to be invited back to someone's nursery? Learn the rules of greenhouse etiquette, no bags or heavy coats in the growing area, do not touch the flowers, do not pull the tags out of the pots, and do not move the plants around. Ask the grower if you have a question about this or that plant, keep your elbows tucked in and keep your hands in your pockets.



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**Learn from Your Mistakes** – The sin is not in making a mistake, it is making the same mistake twice. If you discover your roots are a sodden mess when repotting, ask yourself why. Did I water too much? Did I wait too long to repot? Is the mix too water retentive? Should I have added more Styrofoam or lava rock at to the bottom of the pot for improved aeration and drainage? If you can figure out why something bad happened, you might just be able to prevent that problem from happening again.



5. Ruben Sauleda was my first orchid god. I also turn to Courtney Hackney, Alan Koch, Roy Tokunaga and Fred Clarke for advice and guidance, and am always learning new things from our Orchid Society speakers. If you can, offer to host the out of town speakers. It is like getting a house call from the orchid doctor.

**Knowledge is Power** – The more you learn, from people, from books, from observations, the better you will be able to grow your orchids. Say you read about some minerals being translocatable within the plant (like magnesium) and some not (like calcium). Pretty dry stuff, but if you do not supply enough magnesium to your plant, it will rob magnesium from the older leaves to fuel the growth of the new leaves. In the spring, when the new growth begins, if you seen an inordinate amount of leaf yellowing on the older growths, this little



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nugget of information would suggest you have a magnesium deficiency. Break out the Epsom salts!

**Change is Constant** – We are always tinkering with our potting mixes, fertilizers, snake oils and growing conditions. Many moons ago, I grew cattleyas in a pure tree fern and redwood bark mix, an open freely draining mix that would last for 4 or 5 years in the pot. Then the cost of the tree fern increased as the availability and quality decreased to the point where snow mold would occur in the pots within 2 years of repotting. Gradually more and more inert materials like hydroton, sponge rock and charcoal were added to the mix in lieu of most of the tree fern. Now redwood bark is no longer available. This year I am substituting the coarsest Orchinata bark for about half of the dwindling amount of tree fern in the cattleya mix. Who know what the mix du jour will be next year?

**Everything Old is New Again** – Cypress mulch is back in vogue again. The South Florida orchid growers used it for many years, growing many of the terete vandas in it. Now different growers are using it for cattleyas and other genera, either by itself, as an additive or as a top dressing.

**Trust Your Instincts Luke** –The speakers at your Orchid Society and your fellow orchid growers all will recount experiences of what worked for them under their growing conditions. This is a beautiful thing, but it does not mean that what worked for them will work for you. If someone's suggestion seems interesting, try it. Experiment with it and with variations on the theme. Listen to what everybody says but in the end, trust your instincts and do whatever seems like the right thing to you.

**Live Long and Prosper** – Grow your plants well and they will reward you with bloom after bloom. To paraphrase the Irish blessing:

May the bench rise to meet you,  
May the wind keep away the black.  
May the sun shine warm upon your leaves,  
The rains fall soft upon your roots.  
And until you bloom again,  
May the orchid gods hold you in the palms of their hands.