



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

Evolution of an Orchid Grower

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@hotmail.com



Terry built my first greenhouse in Houston from a redwood kit

I planted my first garden at the age of 10 in the woods next door to our house. My Dad said he'd plow up a section of the yard for my vegetable garden if I could justify the cost, so I sold tomatoes 3 for a quarter that summer and my Dad thought he was raising a good capitalist. Mom was always playing in the dirt and as time went by we developed a Saturday morning routine where we visited as many nurseries as possible, sometimes followed by an afternoon wine tasting, though that's a different story. Terry and I have spent many Saturday mornings continuing the tradition.



The first greenhouse inhabitants.



Invasion of the phalaenopsis!

One fateful day in Houston Terry said he was going to build the greenhouse I had wanted for 20 years, at which point, I thought OK, guess I better learn to grow orchids. The latest edition of Rebecca Northern's *Home Orchid Growing* had just been released and I still think that is the best orchid book for the hobbyist although William Cullina's *Understanding Orchids* is another great source of information.



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There are many steps in the evolution of an orchid grower. The first seems to be that you'll go anywhere and spend anything to have more orchids. You buy half dead plants from the marked off table, you know what day the bag babies from Better-Gro arrive at the big box stores, you pick out orchids from other people's garbage, you pot up any back bulbs you can find, and road trips always involve stops at orchid nurseries. All you know is you need more...



We built the greenhouse before we built our house.



Lots of bench space, for a while...

Somewhere along the line you start hunting for specific types of orchids. My first hunt was for nodosa hybrids. That was the year we got a Mazda MX6 and promptly drove from Houston to Austin to San Antonio buying every nodosa hybrid we could find along the way, all in the name of breaking in the car.

You find that you are attracted to certain types of orchids. I've always been drawn to primary hybrids, even before I knew what a primary hybrid was, perhaps it was the hybrid vigor. Except for some of the incredibly lovely species like Laelia (now Cattleya, ugh!) purpurata I usually prefer the primary hybrid to either of the parent species.



A potting shed and pergola added. Now, what are we going to build in that old vegetable garden?



How about a big shade structure to summer orchids outdoors, with lots of air movement?

Of course, you fill up your allotted space very quickly so you have to keep expanding your growing area. You find you need more space, and if your significant other is as handy as



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Terry, new growing areas are created for your orchids to inhabit even if you experience a little overcrowding problem before the new home is ready.

Then one day you become a bit more selective. You start giving away backbulbs rather than potting them up and having them take up valuable bench space. You decide you don't want to run an infirmary for sick orchids so you discard those genetic weaklings or disease prone plants. You become more selective in your purchases. And, you turn a critical eye to the plants you are growing, asking yourself if there are enough blooms to justify the bench space or if the blooms have a pleasing enough color or shape or would you prefer a different cultivar. Once you learn how to evict plants from your growing area, you have learned the fine art of culling your collection, and have earned an advanced degree in orchid growing.



The hoop houses started showing their age.



Time for a new greenhouse!

I'm not sure quite how I got so obsessed with orchids, but the obsession doesn't have any signs of abating. In the beginning it was phalaenopsis. It was an exciting time for phalaenopsis, the hybridizing for yellows was in its heyday and the harlequin phals had just been introduced. How can you not love phals with their long lived graceful blooms? Then I heard a presentation about catasetums, so naturally I started growing them. What is easier than a plant that requires no winter care during its dormancy but grows like mad in the summer? Next, there was the vanda phase, so many colors, sizes and shapes! After that it was the ephemeral stanhopeas. That addiction started with a *Stanhopea grandiflora* that bloomed 8 times in one year, can you spell hooked? It took a bit of observing how others succeeded with theirs and some trial and error until I could reliably rebloom them and by then I had almost two dozen different varieties. After that came the angraecoids in their white and green glory, dendrochilums with their chains of miniature flowers, bulbophyllums with their wild shapes and articulated lips, habenarias with their exotic flowers and variegated foliage, and... well, you get the idea.

Cattleyas will always be my true love, though when I see an unusual this or that I start a flirtation with other genera. Who knows what tomorrow's obsession will be, although several paraphalaenopsis have followed me home recently. At the end of the day, you have to ask yourself what you're trying to achieve. For me, it's being the best orchid grower I can possibly be, having fun talking about orchids and finding new friends along the way.