



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

What Orchid to Choose

by Mike Heinz

Written in Anticipation of the Spring Orchid Show Season

With all the spring shows going on and all the plants in the world available to us, we have to decide what plants to buy. Stop to consider, where will I grow these plants, what light source is available, what are my watering habits, how often do I fertilize, what are the temperature requirements, what do I know about the plant I bought?

These questions, and a bunch more, must be considered. Let's start with the question of whether to buy species or hybrid plants. This may not appear to require a long thought process until you stop to question your knowledge about the cultural requirements of the plant you want to buy. A species plant does best if you can duplicate the conditions it grew under in its natural habitat. How much rainfall? Is there a drought period? At what elevation was the plant grown? What are the high and low monthly temperatures in the area? Is the plant an epiphyte, lithophyte, or a terrestrial? Does the plant have pseudobulbs? Is the plant monopodial or sympodial? All these questions need to be at least addressed and understood. The better you are at duplicating the natural conditions of the species plant, the better it will grow for you.

The playing field is leveled out a little bit if you choose a hybrid. The hybrid may be a primary cross (a species crossed with another species), or a complex cross (a hybrid crossed with another hybrid, or a species crossed with a hybrid). A hybrid loses more and more of its species cultural requirements with each non-species cross used. The complex hybrid cross may be so far removed from the original species that the species' cultural requirements no longer apply. This will make it easier for the grower to grow a healthy, beautiful, flowering plant.

Another question, do you buy a seedling, which costs a lot less, or do you buy a full grown adult plant. The seedling is going to require a lot more care, has stricter growing requirements, and it may take years before you see your first bloom. The adult plant has made it through the trying years of guarding against everything that can affect the tender young plant, and is probably blooming when you buy it, but at a higher price. The next big hurdle is where will you grow. Will you be growing on a windowsill, back porch, pool deck, under trees, or in a greenhouse? Will you grow your plants outside year round or bring them in to the house/back porch when the temperature drops?

Let's say you are going to grow inside on a windowsill all the time. The amount of light will determine what type of plants will grow best under your conditions. Phals and Paphs have a lower light requirement than Cats, Dendros and other hybrids of these groups. What is your source of water? If you have a water softener you will need to provide a different source of water, because the salt used to soften water is a death sentence to all orchid plants. The plant's requirement for water will have to be determined by a trial and error method. You must find a method to determine when your plants need water, ask other growers how they do it until you find a method that works for you. When you do water your



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plants you can't water too much. One object of heavy watering is to flush all the accumulated salts left over from fertilizing from around the roots, another is to give the roots time to absorb the water the plant needs. The temps inside, for the most part, are well suited for most of the orchids you will see at Florida shows. Orchids hate air conditioning and do like a difference of 10 to 20 degrees between the day and night.

The advantage of a screened porch or pool enclosure includes higher humidity than inside, particularly in the pool enclosure if the chlorine is not too high in the air. You will have several different light zones, and you must decide what plant requires what level of light. Talk to your plants, watch them and see if they are doing well in an area, with the amount of water you are giving them, or the temperature they are in. Anybody who has grown orchids knows how a plants tells you that you are not paying enough attention to them, or are not providing long term correct conditions: THEY DIE. The winter temperatures may require you to move your plants, or put plastic up to keep the cold out, but you can't let the plants get too cold.

You may want to grow under your oak trees during the fair months. You may have to water to supplement the natural rainfall. Now you have another choice to make, what plants grow best under trees during periods of wet weather. Paphs and Phals don't do as well as other plants under these conditions, but can tolerate if their pots are angled so as not to catch water in the crown of the plant. Cats, Dendros, Vandas, and many will do great under trees, or in full sun, if you acclimate them to the higher light levels slowly. Rain water will help fertilize and water with wonderful results.

Greenhouses offer the greatest variety of all, but you still need to know what you are buying, and what the requirements of the plant are. You will have areas that receive more light, less light, areas that are hotter than others, and areas that retain more humidity.

All things that affect your plants must be considered, and controlled if possible, before making your choice of what plants to buy. There are a wide variety of plants that will grow in all the areas I have listed, but remember, not every plant will grow in every location. The nice thing about growing orchids is that you control how deep you want to sink into the hobby. I know there are some sane people that grow orchids out there, I'm just not one of them.