

Ten Commandments for an Orchid Grower

By Ernest Hetherington

Perhaps like the biblical Ten Commandments, ten commandments of orchid growing are a good code to live by, are often observed, often overlooked or broken. In orchid growing how much we know and how long we have been growing orchids is of no value if we do not put into practice what we know.

1: LEARN BASIC GOOD CULTURE

An average orchid, well grown, will give better flowers than a fine variety poorly grown. When breeding is set for a particular plant it cannot be changed. Only the full potential for that variety can be developed through good culture. As simple as it may sound, learn how to water the various genera, learn how to feed and adjust the light. Do not be continually experimenting with new mixes, feeding procedures and all sorts of techniques until you have learned the basics. Develop a good relationship with a grower whose opinions you respect, and who has demonstrated his skills. Listen to him. Wait until you have proven for yourself that you have mastered the basics of good culture before you set out to revolutionize the orchid world.

2: PROVIDE PROPER GROWING FACILITIES

A greenhouse is best. Don't try raising orchids under adverse conditions unless it is absolutely necessary. It is "getting the cart before the horse" if you spend money on orchid plants before you have proper facilities. This may sound like heresy to commercial orchid growers. I am one myself. More plants will follow if you are successful with your first ones.

3: WATCH FOR "CREEPING OBSOLESCENCE"

An orchid collection is forever changing. Your interests do not remain the same. What you liked yesterday will not be your favourite tomorrow. As you build your collection, you will find your tastes become more refined and selective. Realize that you have just so much space, time, energy and money to spend. Get the most satisfaction and pleasure from your orchids. If you have plants that you know are diseased or not doing well, get rid of them (I dare you!). Good orchid plants are no longer expensive. Make sure that every plant produces well and gives you the blooms you desire. If you have Cattleyas, count the leaves on a mature plant. How many out of this total have flowered? You can tell by the flower stubs in the leaf axils. Most should have; otherwise that plant is a non-blooming boarder. Do you have a plant that won't flower though you are determined to make it do so? Give it a fair trial under varying conditions. If it still doesn't flower, get rid of it. There are other plants waiting to take its place. Do you have a plant which flowers well for you but which had inferior flowers? You have divided it. Now you have a dozen plants of the same variety? Give some away to someone who is starting, or as gift plants. Make room for better quality. Keep upgrading your collection and you will get more pleasure from it.

4: LEARN ABOUT DISEASE IDENTIFICATION AND PEST CONTROL

I cannot tell you here how to identify virus and other diseases in orchids. There are some excellent articles and books on the subject in your library. Orchids have certain diseases which can be spread. What a shame to have a beautiful and perhaps expensive orchid become infected with virus merely because you did not learn about virus prevention. Learn basic pest control. Common orchid scale is so easily identified and eradicated with modern insecticides. Learn what a red spider looks like and be on the alert for it. How often beautiful blooms are eaten by slugs and snails, and yet there are so many effective baits available. As for aseptic technique, do not cut your flowers until you have sterilized your cutting tool. There are good chemical sterilizers available.

5: BUY GOOD STOCK

Don't be "pennywise and pound foolish" by trying to fill your greenhouse too quickly and too cheaply. You get what you pay for. Good orchids are no longer expensive. There are so many reputable growers who have seedlings of excellent breeding as well as flowering size plants or small divisions which cost very little. A collection of fine varieties can be so much rewarding.

6: LEARN A LITTLE ABOUT NAMES AND WATCH YOUR LABELLING

You will get so much more pleasure if you know a little about orchid names. How are orchids named? How are they registered? Learn what makes an Lc., a Blc., and the various types of other orchids. Keep your plants well labelled. It is a sad sight to go into a collection and see the names worn off the tags, or the tags themselves completely missing. A plant without identity loses so much of its value.

7: BEWARE OF GIFT PLANTS

This is related to several of the other categories. If you are just starting, beware of the plant your neighbour gave you which he could not flower. Be sure the gift given to you is a plant worthy of your attention. Most plants, which you win at your Society's plant raffle drawings, are of excellent quality and from a reputable grower; however, beware of plants donated by a well-meaning amateur who is not aware of disease or other conditions.

8: SPECIALISE

Orchidology is vast and varied. There are many fields of endeavour. The basic rule is growing what you like. However, you'll get more pleasure out of hybridizing – raising seedlings and watching them grow, hoping for a winner. You may get great satisfaction in having nothing but the finest selected or awarded varieties in your collection. You may wish to specialize in Cymbidiums, Cattleyas, Paphiopedilums, Phalaenopsis or some other genus. There can be a never-ending delight. You may want to fill your greenhouse with nothing but species.

9: BUILD A GOOD LIBRARY

You'll get pleasure from your orchids in direct relationship to your knowledge of what you are doing. There are so many questions to be answered that a good library is invaluable. You can go as far as you wish here, depending on how much of a bibliophile you might be. A few of the basic books might be all that is needed.

10: JOIN YOUR LOCAL ORCHID SOCIETY

When you join your local orchid society, you will receive many benefits. If you attend the monthly meetings, there is always a lecture of general interest. The personal contacts you make are of great value too. By working with others who share your interest, you can truly multiply the benefits you get from your orchid collection. Orchid growing is a hobby which, literally, can give you pleasure all your life. You can surely get the utmost in satisfaction if you bear in mind even a few of the basic commandments which I have listed.