

Dennis Sandberg

by Deborah Medenbach, February 2010

MHOS current president Dennis Sandberg, 61, of Katonah, invites members to present their blooming plants at each month's show table and describe its growing characteristics to help other members.

Sandberg started growing orchids 30 years ago when he came upon some bare root orchids on a flea market table during a Florida vacation. "They were inexpensive, so I bought five of them. The guy said there was nothing to it, but I promptly killed all five. Next time I went back to Florida I bought 10 more and in the process, found other growers and other kinds, and some of them survived and some of them didn't, but I was learning."

Though he hadn't yet had the satisfaction of seeing the slow-growing plants come to flower, he did learn that there were some plants that were nearly impossible for him to kill and others he would have life-long difficulty keeping alive in the growing conditions of his home.

His Westchester house up a long, stone-walled driveway, boasts a spacious master bathroom with a jacuzzi and floor-to-ceiling windows. The tub has not seen a bather in 20 years. The jacuzzi and all surrounding windowsills are crowded with orchids. His back deck is overtaken with lanais sheltering shelves of Ecuadorian miniature orchids, blooming under shade cloth. His private office beyond the deck doubles as an orchid greenhouse and aviary for his breeding parrots. Staying with his nutshell philosophy to buy only the orchids that will grow in your conditions, his comfortable, slightly humid office boasts hundreds of terrestrial paphiopedilums, a wall of epiphytic cattleyas and vandas, and one 10-foot long vanilla orchid climbing an apple branch toward the skylights. A fish tank provides nutrient-rich water for his plants. A far wall has tiny flasks of half-inch orchid seedlings growing in agar gel for the seven to nine years it will take until they're ready to be moved into pots.

"The phalanopsis orchids you get at Home Depot are a popular commercial orchid because growers can get a plant in only about three years," Sandberg said.

Sandberg keeps a database of orchid varieties and bloom photos and is generous with information to help newcomers enjoy plants that will work in their space.