



Photography by Dominick Fiorile

Mariane Garceau runs Black Meadow Orchids in Chester

By Deborah Medenbach

It's a blossom that launched a thousand plundering adventurers. It's a scent that momentarily drove the great sage Confucius out of philosophy and into rapturous poetry. It's a blushable bloom that is so frankly sexual that Victorian women were forbidden to keep it, and herbal guides warned that it "provoked lust exceedingly."

Orchids.

Their variety of size, shape and growing needs can keep the most obsessive enthusiast busy for decades, but in the end, it's a plant of almost magical allure that celebrates manliness from the roots up.

When 58-year-old Cornwall lawyer Jonathan

Chase found his college sweetheart Rita in Florida in 2003 after a couple of decades apart, orchids played a key role in their rekindled romance.

"I had just tracked her down like the Google-dog that I am and got her on the phone. She was really pleased to hear from me, but said she had to go because she was entering an orchid in a show," Jonathan recalls. The crystal trophy for that award-winning dendrobium orchid now sits in a prominent place in their home as a reminder of patience and persistence, both in human and plant life.

Rita's interest in orchids had been a healing pastime when her first marriage was ending. "I was living in the epicenter of orchid growers, so it was easy for me to get into them," Rita says. "When I was divorcing I had to make a decision.

Did I want to spend my money on therapy or orchids? I decided on orchids. I could spend three hours caring for them and think of nothing else. They made me happy."

Her role as a board member for a south Florida orchid society was the only Internet reference to her and helped Jonathan find her again.

Rita and Jonathan married and moved to Cornwall in 2006. Their outside deck is filled with orchids in the summer. The bathroom of Jonathan's home office suite becomes the climate-controlled winter residence for about 30 plants.

"What orchid lovers all seem to have in common is attention to detail and acute powers of observation. They attune to their plants and respond to their needs. Rita's very happy if she can just spend an hour with her plants," Jonathan notes.

## THE QUIRKS OF ORCHID GROWING

Many orchids grow favorably in conditions that would also be comfortable to a naked human: warm, somewhat humid with good air circulation and medium lighting.

Orchids cannot be grown from seed in a home environment. There are several specialty labs around the country that will grow orchid hybrid seeds for you in sterile nutrient medium over a three-year period, sending on the viable plants when they are ready to be adapted to your environment and then potted.

Terrestrial orchids are planted in sphagnum moss or bark chip/perlite mixes. The roots need oxygen and are never planted in soil.

Epiphytic, or air plant orchids, are planted in moss baskets or attached to bark walls. In their natural environment, they grow on trees but are not parasitic to the host tree.

Watering is done once a week. "Weekly water weakly" is one guideline. Another guideline is "drench once and drain." The end result of either method should be an airy, humid medium without soaking wet spaces that could rot roots. Most orchids enjoy 60 to 80 percent humidity, so trays of gravel and water under the plants, or misting a couple of times a day, will keep the leaves hydrated. Fertilizing is done every other watering with a weak, balanced formula.

Most orchids like an east or west window. A south window can be used if it's shielded from direct sun. A north window is adequate if there's an outdoor reflection surface for extra light.

Housekeeping: Clear away dead leaves and cut away diseased leaf portions using a sterile knife or razor. Cut leaves should be treated with a dusting of cinnamon for anti-fungal/anti-bacterial purposes.



Phalaenopsis orchids

Orchids have sparked passions of all kinds throughout Orange County.

On a January night in 1978, a handful of amateur orchid growers formed the Mid-Hudson Orchid Society, gathering in the home of the late Marion Kent in Balmville to think about tropical flowers when the land around them was a frigid snowscape. The group still meets in the afternoon of the second Sunday each month at Union Presbyterian Church on Balmville Road in Newburgh. Membership, now about 75 or so, is evenly balanced between men and women. Dennis Sandberg, president of the Mid-Hudson Orchid Society, invites members to present their blooming plants at each month's show table and describe the growing characteristics to help educate other members.

"I raised a variety of cooler-growing orchids, since I had an unheated porch where I kept my plants," says founding member Ruth Silverman. "My favorites were odontoglossums and oncidiums. Many were miniatures, so it wasn't surprising to have 200 plants in a small space with a wide range of flowering variety."

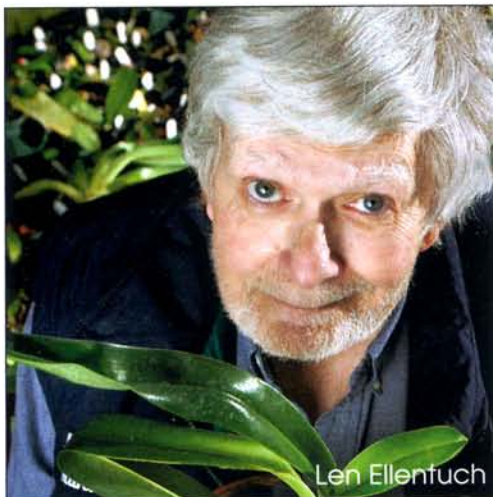
Laura Maxwell of Newburgh incorporates the varied shapes of orchid plants into her sculptures and feng-shui interior designs. The flowers connect her to life's basic joys.

"They seem to come just when my spirit needs a lift: after a failed sales transaction, a relationship gone sour or a loved one has passed," Laura says. "I look at my orchid and there it is, literally overnight, the beginning of a bloom – the visual proof that life and wonderment still exist, right there, in my room."

Club Vice President Ruth Nattras of Middletown is also what's called a "windowsill grower" and has a few hundred plants crowding all windows and table surfaces of her home. "I love dendrobiums and cattleyas, though I'm not very good at getting the cattleyas to bloom," she admits. She keeps her home warm in winter with pebbled humidity trays under each grouping.

Nattras is convinced that good orchid growing requires a tolerance for killing off a few.

"I kept the tags of the plants I killed and after a while had a whole box full. It just made me upset, so I threw it out. I learned pretty quickly which



varieties just wouldn't grow in my house and I had no business buying in the first place. I didn't need the tags to remind me," Natras says. "Some people think orchid growers are snooty, but it's not that. They're just really into the technical stuff and can identify things with surprising ease."

A secret that all orchid growers confirmed was the subtle vulnerability orchids have to lighting and humidity conditions.

"This greenhouse might appear to have uniform light, but really there are micro-climates



## UPCOMING REGIONAL ORCHID SHOWS

### Mid Hudson Orchid Society Spring Show

March 13, Union Presbyterian Church, Balmville Road, Newburgh. For club information, go to [mhos.us.com](http://mhos.us.com).

### New York Botanical Gardens Orchid Show

Feb. 21-April 11, Fordham Road, Bronx.

### Deep Cut Orchid Show

10 a.m.-6 p.m. Feb. 4-7, Dearborne Market, Route 35, Holmdel, N.J. Largest orchid society in New Jersey. [deepcutorchids.com](http://deepcutorchids.com).

### International Orchid Show and Sale

9 a.m.-5 p.m. March 27-29, Longwood Gardens, Route 1, Kennett Square, Pa.

happening," explains Mariane Garceau, a Mid-Hudson Orchid Society member who runs Black Meadow Orchids in Chester. "North and south walls are suitable for different plants."

Ana Santos of Goshen didn't understand that when she first began raising orchids three years ago in the Bronx and picked up a Vanda Luz orchid that only survived her upstate move a year ago when she put it in her bathroom. "I only have it because I was new to raising orchids and didn't know any better," Ana says, laughing. As her confidence grew, she and her daughter Christina, now 11, had success raising South African and Ecuadorian orchids. Ana did a 4-H project with Christina's local club, giving each of the girls a plant that had just been deflasked and taught them how to pot and care for it until it grew to flowering.

"The future of growing these plants is the children, so you have to get them interested at a young age," she says.

On the other end of the spectrum is Len Ellentuch, who is letting go of his orchid hobby after 30 satisfying years. He'd had a stroke and a couple of heart attacks and wrestled with diabetes. He was even dead for a while once, he says, laughing that there had been no white lights or angel visits – just dead. And then doctors revived him and he wasn't dead, so he went back to a life of watering his orchids and African violets. But it put things in perspective for this successful businessman, who had once paid \$900 for a single Rothschild orchid seedling that bloomed 18 years later.

Orchids teach you patience.

While the weather was still good, Len began giving away his 10,000-plant collection. His careful cataloguing system for more than 2,000 varieties, some of which were hybrids he created himself, were cross-checked against numbered tags before box loads of plants were removed from the greenhouse by grateful friends. By early

November, he was down to a few benches of plants.

He holds up a freckled, wavy leafed paphiopedilum clinging to half a pot of coconut husk chips. "This one here is a Vietnamese and delatanii China cross called Ho Chi Minh. It's one of the legal ones," he says, turning the pot appraisingly in his palm and explaining current endangered species protection laws designed to prevent the kind of pillaging of tropical orchid habitats that drove some species into extinction in the 19th century. "I know a guy over 80 years old who spent three years in jail over one of these."

"Can't I give you anything?" a woman asks as she tucks a basket laden with paphiopedilums into her car.

"What you can give me is the promise that you will listen to them and let them teach you about themselves," he says. "That's all. You'll lose some, but you'll learn a lot."

## ORCHID TYPES

Orchids are the largest family of flowering plants. There are 30,000 orchid species and more than 100,000 hybrid varieties. There are air and terrestrial varieties and they are found in every part of the world. Popular orchid varieties that can be grown in the home include:

**Paphiopedilums** (lady slipper orchids)

**Phalaenopsis** (moth orchids, most commonly seen in home garden centers)

**Oncidiums**

**Dendrobiums** (Hawaiian lei orchids)

**Cattleyas** (corsage orchids)

A specialty orchid for those with greenhouse access is the vanda orchid, an air plant that thrives in 80 percent humidity. The Mid-Hudson Orchid Society has several vanda growers.

For those with low light and humid, cool spaces, consider masdevallia and Dracula orchids. These plants have some of the more unusual flower shapes of the orchid family. Other cool-loving orchids are odontoglossums, oncidiums and miltonia.