

Blooming Cult

ORCHIDS ARE THE SHAMELESS SEDUCERS OF THE PLANT WORLD, AND THERE ARE 30,000 MEMBERS OF THE AMERICAN ORCHID SOCIETY ALONE TO PROVE IT. AIMEE LEE BALL MEETS THE SELF-DESCRIBED ORCHID NUTS.

Just as I am about to fold, feeling like Dorothy in a cryptic Oz, a habitu  of this strange world comes over and whispers conspiratorially, sharing a secret of the cabal: "Orchids are pure sex."

Okay, now I'm paying attention. I have crashed a meeting of the Greater New York Orchid Society, and so far it's been like auditing a class conducted in a language that I don't speak. In one corner is a workshop on "the relative difficulty and adaptability of the *Phalaenopsis amabilis* to *Phalaenopsis violacea*." In another corner is a discussion of "sodium-vapor high-intensity-discharge light versus coated-metal halides for indoor growing." This is a High Mass in Latin, floral worship for apostles of the creed.

Groups like this one meet somewhere in the world almost every night of the week: self-described orchid nuts. Those who fall under the spell are smote by the same powerful forces that have forever inspired passion: beauty, mystery—and the aura of money. The money part is really bogus: Orchids have no intrinsic economic value whatsoever, a fact cheerfully conceded by orchidists even as they're forking over sums that would underwrite cars or diamonds. (Only vanilla, the seed capsule of an orchid from Central and South America, has commercial value.)

But orchids have historically been associated with pomp. And there are endless fascinating variations on the theme—30,000 species and more than 100,000 hybrids at last count, one of the largest families of flowering plants in the world. *Vanilla planiflora* may be the most famous orchid, but there's an oncidium that smells like chocolate and a paphiopedilum that smells like rotten meat. There's a phragmipedium with Fu Manchu whiskers and a bulbophyllum that looks like it is having a bad hair day. Orchids grow from the Amazon to the Arctic Circle—both Lilliputian and Brobdingnagian—and in every color except black, despite Brenda Starr's classic comic-strip search. "A rose is a rose is a rose," one woman told me with some hubris. "Not so with orchids."

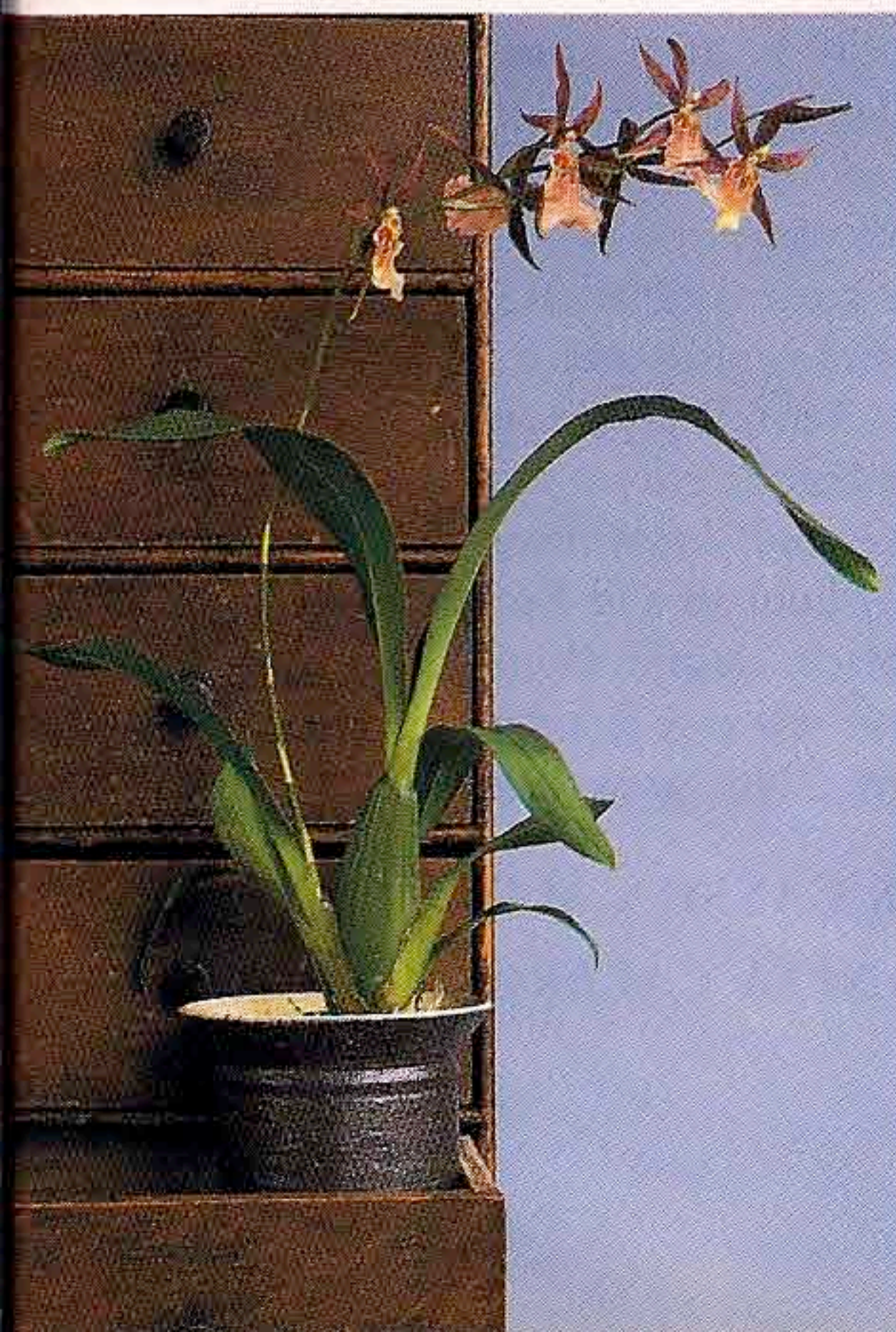
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANITA CALERO

PROP STYLIST: BARBARA FIERROS; BACKGROUND: ROOMS & GARDENS, NYC





Since it's frequently used in corsages, the cattleya (left) is probably the most familiar orchid to the layman. The flowers of this Central and South American native come in a wide range of colors and generally emit a delicate fragrance. Brass pot from Takashimaya (\$125). *Phalaenopsis* (center) means "mothlike in appearance," but these dainty-looking orchids belie their name: They are tough and hardy, and very long-lasting—up to nine months on the plant in some instances. Iron brazier from Brahm-Netski (\$2,500). Found in Asia and Australasia, dendrobiums (right) are tree-dwelling orchids, which means when potted there's always a danger of overwatering them, thereby inhibiting the development of buds. Sèvres porcelain Louis XVI planter from Paris to Provence (\$3,000).



The orchid is no arriviste. It's an ancient lifeform, duly noted about 2,500 years ago in the *I Ching*: "Words by friends with one and the same heart are just as sweet as the aroma of the orchid." But real orchidmania dates back to the sixth duke of Devonshire, who saw one at a London horticultural exposition in the late 18th century and started sending minions to retrieve the plants from the ends of the Earth, creating a new blood sport among the silk-stocking set. The British aristocracy sponsored explorers such as Captain Bligh of H.M.S. *Bounty*, either directly, by funding expeditions, or indirectly, by being good customers. The best patrons got new discoveries named after them (ergo, the *Vanda Rothschildiana*). Competition was intense because so many plants died in transit from the High Andes or the Annapurnas. Orchid hunters spied, stole, and smuggled. One favorite gambit was urinating into a competitor's shipment so the orchids would rot on the trip home.

"Fortunes were spent and made—one

There are more than 100,000 orchid hybrids—many occurring in nature, but many thousands created by man. The examples here—Degarmoara (top left; terra-cotta pot by Belle Fleur, \$14); Maclellanara (top right; pot by Takashimya, \$35); and another Degarmoara (bottom; ceramic vase by Felissimo, \$200)—are all cultivated hybrids with complex heritages, meaning two or more parents in their background. The cymbidium (center), beautiful when in flower, is also a fine-looking plant with attractively curving foliage. Ranging from Australia to Japan and all the way to India, these orchids grow at around 5,000–8,000 feet and need cool nights and bright days in order to flower. Roman-style, late-19th-century brass planter from George Glazer Gallery (\$350).

plant might have been worth thousands of pounds," says Ned Nash, the director of education and conservation for the American Orchid Society in West Palm Beach, Florida. "Competition was so fierce professional trackers would register a new variety but conceal the exact location through intentional misdirection and false description. Or else they would strip an entire area of a species so nobody else could get it. There was a great rivalry to have the lone example of one species or every example of another. Then, as now, orchidists were collectors, with the same qualities as collectors of stamps or teapots. These were rare and beautiful and exotic things. It was like having moonrocks."

And then there's that sex quotient. "If I weren't a scientist, I'd think orchids have a special spirit that appeals to us and says *sex, sex, sex*," says Joseph Arditti, orchid authority and professor of biology at the University of California, Irvine, who lectures on "Sex and the Single Orchid."

The orchid's sexual mystique is part historical, part structural. *Orchis* is the Greek word for testicle (which some orchid roots are said to resemble), and legend held that the plants grew from animal semen. Ancient medicine men made healing pastes or tinctures from flowers that resembled parts of the human body (hence the orchid's reputation as an aphrodisiac), and Australian aborigines used the seed as a birth-control device. (No one knows if it works.)

Orchids are hermaphrodites. Their blossoms are distinguished from those of other flowering species by a single column comprising stamen and pistil—a plant's male and female reproductive parts. (The blossom is structured in such a way as to prevent self-pollination.) The sole purpose of an orchid flower is to lure whatever insect or bird it requires to pollinate it. This mandate involves elaborate guile and sophisticated artifice. If, as Truman Capote is heard to quip in the play *Tru*, the poinsettia is the Robert Goulet of botany, then the orchid is Georgette Mosbacher.

"An orchid expends a lot of effort attracting attention, the way women do with clothes and jewelry," says Arditti. "Unlike people, the relationship between orchids and their pollinators is constant and faithful, but they go about courtship in a similar fashion. Some produce a sugar, the way men might offer a box of candy, and some attract with a scent, like women and perfume. There is one orchid that smells like garbage because it is pollinated by a fly. Some orchids secrete a nectar that gets a bee drunk, and some mimic a female wasp to arouse the male—this is called pseudocopulation. Once the orchid is pollinated, its beauty fades, like the wages of sin. The bug must think, 'My God, is *that* what I went home with last night?'"

Orchids aren't any longer the exclusive province of the wealthy: New propagating techniques have brought some varieties to Kmart. But the nexus of glamour still adhering to them remains a fundamental part of their appeal. (continued on page 192)



This hybrid, *Phalaenopsis* Taisuco, is commonly known as a candy-stripe orchid, for obvious reasons. Though it's not to be found in the wild, its genetic parents are—growing two-thirds of the way up the trunks of trees, primarily in the hottest and most humid parts of the world. Dried vase from William Yeoward Glass (\$120).

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"You can't believe that you are growing the same things that intrigued the royalty of Europe and the robber barons of American society," says Valla Kolman, the vice-president of marketing and sales of several newspapers in Brentwood and Bel Air, California, and vice-president of the Malibu Orchid Society. "It transports you to the tropics. And you get to play God." From the ladies' room of the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills to the Pottery Barn on Manhattan's Broadway, orchids (or their silk counterfeits) are conspicuously displayed by any restaurant or boutique, hotel or hairdresser, trying to convey an aura of refinement. *Harper's Bazaar* recently declared them the "everywhere flower." Pay attention, and you'll see a cattleya in the background of *The Young and the Restless*, a paphiopedilum on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

It's not the first time orchids have been associated with science fiction: In the story *The Flowering of the Strange Orchid*, H.G. Wells portrayed orchids as minatory plants with a thirst for human blood. But they are neither the inveigling parasites nor the hothouse flowers of popular myth.

"If given half a chance, they will insist on growing," writes Henry Jaworski in *Orchids Simplified*. "It's a well-known phenomenon that orchids on their last legs, abused by their owners, often leafless and almost rootless, will sometimes bloom one more time before they die."

There are some species, like the *Stanhopea*, that feel like shoe leather yet last only three days, while others, like the *Dendrobium formosum*, feel like tissue paper yet last two months. Orchidists often start out innocently enough: They receive a single plant as a gift or, inspired by a Nero Wolfe mystery, buy one as a bold experiment, expecting a potted prima donna who will commit suicide on the windowsill. They end up building greenhouses and planning vacations around botanical conferences in Sri Lanka and Glasgow. "The best way to get someone hooked is to give him one orchid plant," says Ned Nash. "It's like heroin and the pusher: The first one is free."

I've now heard orchids compared to sex and drugs, which is a far piece down the road from the purple wrist corsage I associate with my great-aunt Florrie. The people at orchid clubs don't look like her ei-

Most Popular Species



CATTLEYAS are the species most people know—think corsages for the senior prom or Mother's Day. They were discovered by accident, used as

packing material in a 19th-century shipment of tropical plants from South America to England. The flowers have a delicate fragrance and come in a rainbow of colors. They love warmth and sunshine, with a lower night temperature.

CYMBIDIUMS probably got their name from the Greek word for a drinking cup, which they resemble.



Their native habitats include Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, and the Himalayas, where they grow at high elevations, with bright light and cool nights. The long-lasting flowers, found in many colors, grow on long spikes that sometimes arch into graceful sprays, often the subject of Oriental art.

DENDROBIUMS come from the Far East—



India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Korea, and the snow-capped mountains of Japan and China. There are about 1,000 different varieties in habitats from steamy jungles to chilly mountains, and in every color imaginable.

ONCIDIUMS—or dancing dolls—come from Florida, Mexico, the West Indies, Central and South America. The predominant color is yel-

low, but there are reds, pinks, lavenders, even polka dots. They all require good light, but the ones that come from the high altitudes of Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador need cooler temperatures.



PAPHIOPEDILUMS—or lady's-slippers—are



native to Southeast Asia, the Himalayas, and the warmer areas of China. Most grow on the forest floor under large, shady trees. The ones with

plain leaves like cooler temperatures; those with mottled leaves like it warmer. The waxy flowers—in red, white, brown, and green, often striped or spotted—can last over a month.

PHALAENOPSIS—or moth orchids—come



from Java, Burma, the Malay Archipelago, and Australia.

They're one of the easiest orchids to grow, requiring less light than most, with showy

flowers in white, pink, yellow, or peppermint stripes that may last many months. They favor warm temperatures and high humidity.

VANDAS are lei orchids, the traditional flower of the Hawaiian Islands, as well as China, Burma,



India, and Thailand. The flowers, which are white, brown, pink, or lavender, grow at intervals on long stems. They need warmth and a lot of

light, and produce abundant flowers over a long period of time.—A.L.B.

ther: I saw stockbrokers and lawyers and building contractors and a studio musician for Jackson Browne. And, unlike Florrie, they're all demented.

"We're going to be able to get the bug lady!" goes the announcement at one meeting, and the room erupts, anticipating the final solution to orchid pests. One woman takes me aside and says, with mock gravity, "You know, there's rape in the orchid world." Really? "Yes, there are people who swipe the pollen of a prizewinning plant to pollinate their own." There are also people who have little orchid cemeteries, retaining the identification sticks from plants that bite the dust. (In this coven you have to kill 100 orchids before

you're a true member of the faith.) There are people who shower with their orchids, insisting it's an efficient way to water them. There are those who water their orchids with rain collected off the roof—but they always measure the pH first—because tap-water contains salts and minerals to which their plants are sensitive. There are people who trail along behind Elderhostel groups at the airport, intending to blend in with the innocuous-looking seniors in order to sneak orchids past the customs inspectors.

This is no longer an amusing anecdote to those who know that the rainforests have been depleted by collectors, and orchids now fall under the Convention on International Trade (continued on page 194)

Growing Tips

Orchid-growers claim their plants thrive on benign neglect. And that's true: The surest way to kill an orchid is overwatering, but the key to success is finding out how each orchid lives in its native habitat and then reproducing that ecosystem on a small scale in your home. Some orchids, called terrestrials, grow domestically in soil that approximates the rich jungle-floor humus in which they take root in the wild. But in an evolutionary solution to the battle for ground-level space in the rainforests, most orchids became epiphytes over the eons, meaning they grow in trees, or lithophytes, meaning they attach themselves to rocks. Their roots must breathe, so when cultivated, they're potted with chopped bark from redwoods or Douglas firs, not soil. Even within a single host tree, there can be several microclimates, from the moist shade of the trunk to the full sun of the upper canopy. Left in the wild, orchids find places to thrive, but in the home you must meet their special needs:

LIGHT Cultivated orchids have adapted to much less light than they're used to in nature. But generally those that come from the forest floor like low levels of light, while those that grow in treetops prefer full sun. Orchids can be grown successfully in basements, hallways, or closets with fluorescent lights.

TEMPERATURE Some like it hot (a night and day range of 65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit). Some like it cool (55 to 65). Most like it in between (60 to 70). Most of the familiar species come from tropical areas, but there are thousands that grow on mountains where the air is cool, or plateaus with temperate climates.

WATER Most cultivated orchids need to dry out between waterings, which some require every day, some every week. There are even

some that need a long, moist growing season followed by a dry dormancy. Fanatics debate the merits of various water-treatment systems—deionized, distilled, reverse-osmosis filtration—but all agree you should never use softened water, which contains salts harmful to orchids.

HUMIDITY Moisture in the air keeps orchids from drying out without encouraging the growth of fungi and bacteria. Species with thin leaves need more humidity than those with thick leaves. Growing the plants on trays filled with damp pebbles increases the humidity. Mist the leaves on sunny days, especially the undersides, which are more absorptive. And cluster the plants together to increase humidity.

AIR Many orchids are used to tropical breezes. The only way to imitate that kind of air circulation at home is with fans. Moving air cools the leaves and protects the orchids from pollutants such as cooking fumes or aerosol sprays.

CONTAINERS Porous clay allows the potting medium to dry out more readily, but if the pot has been used before it must be cleaned by soaking it for several hours in a solution of one part Clorox to four parts water. Never paint clay pots—it seals off the pores. Some orchid pots have vertical slits for easy drainage. Plastic is an advantage in areas with hard water, since it doesn't hold salts, which can burn the roots. Orchids also grow well in baskets lined with sphagnum moss and on slabs of wood or cork, to which they're fastened with twine or wire.

MEDIUM Potting material does not provide nourishment but simply anchors the orchid. Terrestrials need soil that is light and porous, with good drainage. Epiphytes are almost always grown in a mixture that includes fir bark pressed firmly around the roots (some people add Styrofoam "peanuts," old wine corks, or charcoal). Bark that is soaked first is easier to press in a pot and will hold moisture better, but it will stain bare hands.

FERTILIZER All fertilizers contain nitrogen, phosphorous, and potash. Nitrogen gives healthy leaf color, phosphorous stimulates flowering, and potash builds strong roots. The best time to fertilize is after watering, never when the plant is dry. Orchids grown as houseplants need less fertilizer than those in greenhouses because they receive much less light. If the tips of the leaves become dry, you're overfeeding.

REPOTTING Orchids need to be repotted after flowering or if they outgrow their pots. Any decayed roots must be trimmed, and long aerial roots have to be cut back even if healthy—it's difficult to get them in a new pot without damaging them. Use razor blades that have been sterilized in an open flame, a different blade for each plant to avoid spreading virus. After repotting, an orchid will need little water because the roots are inactive. Repotting is always something of a shock to the plant, and the flowers will not be at their best until the following year.

All orchids go through a rest period after flowering. Most look no different when they're resting, but they have different needs: lower temperatures, less humidity, and less water. Conversely, most orchids have a growth spurt in the summer, at which time some species require more watering, more misting, more ventilation.

The American Orchid Society has more than 500 affiliates in just about every city in the country. There are monthly meetings with guest speakers, show tables, raffles, and inexpensive plants for sale. The AOS publishes *Orchids*, a monthly magazine loaded with information on orchid culture and cultivation. The advertising section has many sources for plants and supplies. The AOS also publishes a free book list: Many titles are available at a discount. AOS Headquarters: 6000 South Olive Avenue, West Palm Beach, FL 33405; 561-585-8666.—A.L.B.

in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, which subjects orchids to strict import regulations in over 140 countries.

"There's an increased awareness of this huge ecosystem on Earth, an understanding that humans are the only part of it who can exert a custodial role," says Earl Hatleberg, an artist who turned his liabil-

ities into assets by starting a wholesale orchid business in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, "and it polarizes people into two groups: those who want to preserve an orchid in its natural habitat, and those who will go to any length so they can have it, and probably kill it. But many of the rare ones have been collected and

propagated artificially, and most countries are requiring verification that any endangered species have been bred domestically. The rare orchid no longer comes from the wild, and the colorful stories now involve how much someone spent."

There are almost 30,000 members of the American Orchid Society, with 13,000



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new members joining in the last 10 years. "Like collectors in any field, orchid enthusiasts may have little else in common," says Hatleberg. "And anyone yielding to an obsession will seem crazy."

Orchid hobbyists are known as the connoisseurs' market, and they act the part. They speak somewhat contemptuously of the "pot-plant" market—Rodeo Drive matrons who buy an orchid in bloom to decorate a room but toss it when the flower is gone—or Lake Shore Drive dilettantes who, when the plants are straggly or plain, send them away to orchid curators for care and nurture, only bringing them back into the home when they are in a state of perfect grace, like children on holiday from boarding school. Bona fide orchidists, on the other hand, are the doting parents, often speaking of their plants as if they were forward, complicated children. "They should never have wet feet when they go to bed," warns one man at a club meeting. Another talks about visiting the seedlings of a beloved orchid that have been sold off, as if it were a case of open adoption. Still another reports that a prize specimen flowered at a time when he was away so he could not save any pollen. There is a funereal silence in the room, as if he were talking about a stillbirth.

I go on the Internet, typing in the keyword *orchid*. I find 21,953 matches (these folks have *way* too much free time on their hands), with chat rooms for special interests (there is a Cymbidium Society of America and a Phalaenopsis Alliance). Orchid people don't necessarily look like their plants, the way dog owners sometimes show distinct poodle or Pekingese qualities, but they happily speculate on the connections between themselves and their favorite species. "An orchid's only purpose is to seduce the other forms of life that pollinate it," says Hatleberg. "When a particular orchid excites you, I think you have something in common with the animal it's trying to attract. The plant's structure and color, its specialized seductive qualities, touch you in a primal place. I love cattleyas, but they're so vaginal-looking, I may be a closet heterosexual."

Orchid lovers never have enough, and they're not immune to the same sort of chicanery that augmented the collections of the 18th- and 19th-century English aristocracy. It is not uncommon to hear of someone sneaking new orchids into the house and lying about it to a spouse, like the woman who cuts the price tag off a new dress and says, This old thing? when her husband comments on her finery. But most orchid people eventually start fine-tuning a collection, seeking out the unusual, even the weird, rather than the merely beautiful. They begin to revel in the diversity of possibilities offered by the genus, just like people who collect tropical fish or snuffboxes. It is the sheer variety, the hybridization limited only by imagination, that keeps them coming back for more.

And finally there is the camaraderie of like-minded maniacs. Judith Shapiro understands. Shapiro, a dermatologist and board member of the Greater Westchester Orchid Society, lost her greenhouse in a divorce settlement and had to find a new home for her orchids (never mind herself). Hurriedly, and worriedly, she accepted the offer of a woman she'd met only on the phone. "She pulled up in a gray Mercedes and proceeded to put all the pots on the car's gray leather seats," Shapiro recalls, smiling at the reminiscence. "I knew they'd be in good hands."

Need it be said? Shapiro broke ground for a new orchid greenhouse the day after she moved into her own home. ■

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