

# An Extended Orchid Family

## Why I Grow the Orchids I Grow

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY LOEFFLER

THIS HAS TO be one of the best questions someone can ask anyone involved in orchids. If you ask 100 orchid growers, you could probably get 100 different stories. Before I explain why I grow the orchids I grow, I would like to tell you a story. This story has an ending I never saw coming.

It begins with a “yes” moment. My wife was driving by our local community center in the winter of 2011 and saw signs for an orchid show and sale. I do not really remember, but my wife said it had some sort of theme and asked if we could stop. Of course my response was, “yes.”

We walked into the front entrance and immediately were met with an intoxicating cocktail of orchid aromas. The first thing I remember seeing were mountains of orchids arranged at one end of the hall. For the life of me, I could not figure out how someone could take all these colors of orchids and create those mountains. Hundreds of people were taking pictures and talking about which were their favorites. We spent an hour just looking and wandering around and looking at those mountains.

Making our way around the rest of the hall, we walked through what seemed like a supermarket of orchids. So many colors, sizes and shapes. I had no idea what I was looking at and just followed my wife around telling her, “yes, I like that one” and “oh, that is really pretty!” She found a few orchids that she wanted to buy and asked what I thought. What I really thought was, “this is a stick with a few leaves on it, why would you want that?” But of course you cannot say that to your wife, at least not like that. I was in a tough spot. Being the good husband that I am (I was in this place because of “yes,” after all!) I told her “If that is what you want, you should get it.” I later found out what she bought was called bare root. No flowers, not potted, just a stick and leaves. I had no knowledge of any of this. But what the heck, she was happy, and I was a good husband.

We continued around the community center and found a lot of people with the



same color t-shirts walking around. They were all volunteers doing different types of jobs; it seemed they had 100 colored t-shirts on that floor. My wife stopped to ask one of the t-shirt guys about this group and found out it was a local orchid society that meets once a month in this same building.

This got my wife asking even more questions. The man we came to know as Jimmy started explaining they would have a growers’ clinic the following week. Jimmy explained a mentors program they had that would pair an experienced grower with a new grower. We must have talked with Jimmy for about half an hour when my wife asked if he would be her mentor. We will never forget the smile that came over Jimmy’s face as she asked him that question. Jimmy said “yes...”

The following Wednesday evening my wife attended the growers’ clinic. She asked me if I would go so she did not have to walk in alone. I told her I would go with her for the first time. I thought I could sit and listen about this stuff for an evening. I mean what is one evening; it could not

be that bad. This class had about seven or eight people in attendance. Jimmy was in the back of the room and we sat up near the front. I do not even remember what the instructor was talking about, as it was all Greek to me. (I mean, what is a “catt” or a “phal,” really?) The information given that night was enough for my wife; she was in.

She was signing up and going to the next meeting. Before we left the class, Jimmy asked what we thought. My wife was thrilled and could not wait, “Jimmy, are you still going to be my mentor?” she asked. And we saw that smile again — the one that lights up his whole face. As we walked out the door that night of the growers’ clinic, Jimmy was invited to our house, and a wonderful friendship began.

On Sunday Jimmy came to our house and went right into orchid educating. We sat at our kitchen table with my wife’s new all-in-one computer and saw a ton of orchids. We found out that a “catt” is really a cattleya, an orchid with a really good-sized flower. Cattleyas were the



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original corsage orchid, worn by women for proms, weddings and for Mother's Day. Five minutes into his visit, I knew a lot about orchids, or so I thought. After another hour or so around that table looking at so many different cattleyas, I realized that I really knew nothing about orchids. Before Jimmy left he invited us to his house to see his collection. There was no way I was turning down that invitation; my curiosity was piqued.

The mentor program turned out to be a program started by a wonderful lady named Peg. Peg started this program to pair mentees with mentors. This gave the new members a social aspect, keeping us interested in orchids and at the same time giving us new orchid friends. This program seemed to spill into the growers' clinics as well. Many of the mentees became friends with other mentees and the circle of friends grew rapidly. Many mentors would also attend growers' clinics and create an open-forum clinic. As time went on, the number of friends at the clinics jumped to between 18 and 20. We saw many new mentors — Cynthia, Carol and

Richard to name a few. These people would come to be involved in our lives more than we could ever imagine.

Did I mention I was going with my wife for one meeting so she would not feel awkward walking in by herself? Well, that did not work at all. We found out we were being groomed over the last few months to take over the membership directors positions, as Jimmy was going to become vice president of programs. Within a few months we were on the board of an orchid society and had another group of friends. This sat well with me. I was not the better orchid grower. That was my wife. But we felt we could help organize and help run this society. We make a good pair, my wife and I. It seems the society thought so as well.

Jimmy had taken over the growers' clinics and I would pick his brain as to what he was going to do next. One time he mentioned the clinic would be on how to divide orchids. We had been shown this at one of our visits to Jimmy's house. I mentioned that with classes getting bigger, it might be hard for people to see

[1] The Venice Area Orchid Society's highly successful Growers Clinic — where the author's slippery slope began.

[2] The Loeffler Team's wonderfully executed display for the Venice Area Orchid Society's 50th show. Titled simply *The 50th Show in Venice*, the display received an 86pt AOS Show Trophy and an 86pt Silver Certificate recognizing the display's outstanding design elements.

what he was doing. We came up with an idea to use a camcorder and projector to show what he was doing up close. We started using this for other clinics also, and saw our attendance go up to 25–30. Everyone seemed to be more involved and we had a ton of fun.

In our second year we went up to our sister society's orchid show. On the last day, I helped bring home orchids from the display that they had put up a few days earlier. Before takedown I was walking around with Carol looking at the displays and I started making comments about them. Carol looked at me and said "You



have an eye for this.” I had no idea how they put these displays together but could see what was working and what was not. At the next board meeting I made sure to tell Richard, our vice president of displays, that if he needed help I would be more than happy to do whatever I could.

Richard had stepped into the vice president of displays position when the previous person dropped out. I handled whatever his display team needed. I watched him build those mountains we had seen at that first show we went to. It did not take too long for me to start having ideas of how to put these together. Richard and I would spend hours talking over ideas we could use. The grooming had begun.

Richard was making me his replacement and I could not learn it fast enough. The following season Richard introduced me to Michael, a commercial vendor who put together some of the finest displays I had seen in my short time with orchids. Michael would put together his displays and I was off in the back taking pictures of what he built, step by step. Because we had our own display

being built I missed a few steps, but it got me started.

Michael is one of the nicest men I now know. Whenever we were at the same show I would wander over and see what he had done. I have more pictures of displays he put together than he knows. (Am I a display stalker? Is that even a thing?) After we finished with our display I would ask Michael to look it over and give me pointers on how to improve on what we had done. Every time, he freely gave us his opinions and offered little tricks to improve upon what we had done. Michael got the Best in Show and AOS Show Trophy awards every time I saw one of his displays. I thought “I want to be like Mike.”

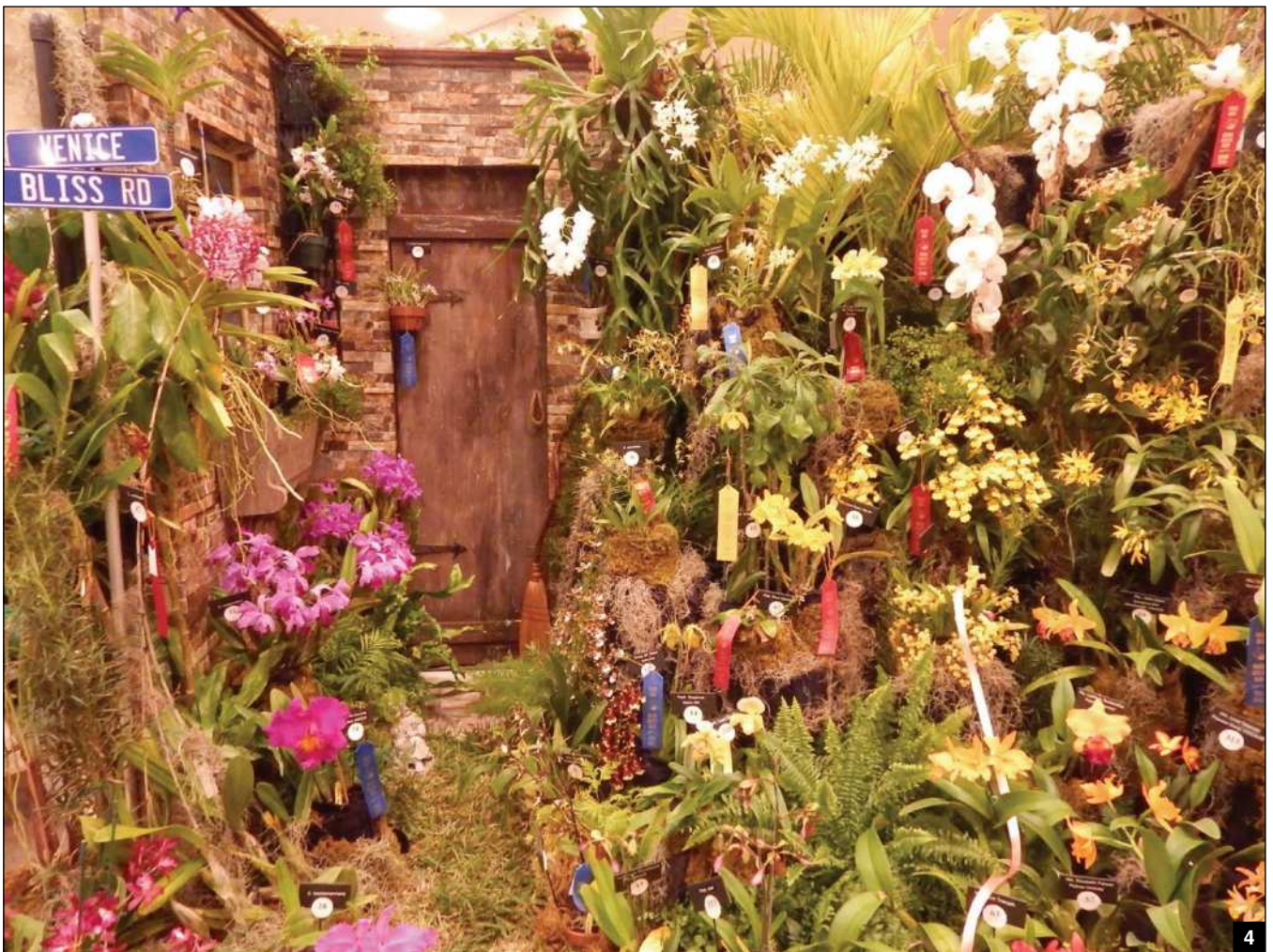
I got my chance with our own display team a few years later. We gathered all the props and orchids from our members and drove 1½ hours to set up my team’s first display. Richard forgot to tell me that I would get no sleep the night before a show. Do we have this? Did we remember that? Will we have enough orchids? What colors will we have to work with? It was self-inflicted stress. The display was going

[3] The *Venice Area Orchid Project* received an 83pt Educational Excellence Certificate at the February 2016 show. Exceptionally well executed, it is hard to tell where display blends to background.

[4] *Orchid Bliss*, the Loeffler Team’s 2017 display did it again — this time an 85pt AOS Show Trophy and an 85pt Silver Certificate.

well when all of a sudden I could not see how to continue the color flow on the cool color side. I started to get very nervous as time was becoming an issue. Richard saw what was happening; he stopped me and said, “Just go to the other side and finish this side later.” Wow, so easy and I never saw it. Thanks again to Richard we received a First Place trophy for Best Society Display.

Our next display was not at an AOS-judged event. We decided to go way outside the box and try a 3D-type display. We hung a 10-foot × 10-foot (3-m × 3-m) photographer’s backdrop of a tree canopy and brought the orchids out to the front of the display. It really turned out well and



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I wished it could have been judged. I did see a photo of that display a few months later in another online garden magazine.

Now it was time to put together our third display at our own society show and sale. We had an idea in mind for almost a year before; this was our 50th show. Another member from our society named Bruce helped build a prop that was 7 feet (2.1 m) tall and 8 feet (2.4 m) wide that looked like an old Italian cottage. As if we did not have enough to do, we also wanted to put in an educational display for a project we had started — hanging orchids in the trees throughout our small town parks. None of this could have happened if our members had not pulled together and helped out.

This story of why I grow the orchids I grow, has really turned into a story of a large group of friends who enjoy orchids and have become a major aspect of our lives. Why I grow the orchids I grow really has less to do with orchids than the friends we have made. We love our orchids and have a small greenhouse with a collection of about 300. We water, fertilize, divide, repot and enjoy our plants just like all of

you. But one other thing we enjoy are the blossoms of friendship.

I had planned on going to one meeting with my wife, never expecting to end up with so many wonderful friends. I expect to make many more. When you think back on your time with orchids I hope you can thank as many people as I do: my wife Judy and good friends like Jimmy, Peg, Bill, Carol, Richard, Mary, Renee, Bruce, John, Sharon and the many other members of our society who help out with so many things.

And those displays we did for our 50th show? We took a first-place trophy for Best Society Display, an AOS Educational Exhibit Certificate and the AOS Show Trophy for best overall display. When you have a team of good friends it is easier to win. Michael was at this show and received the trophy for Best Commercial Display. He was one of the first people I had to thank.

That day... I was like Mike.

— Jay Loeffler became a member of the Venice Area Orchid Society with his wife Judy in 2012. They joined the society board that same year and have been

board members ever since. In 2014 Jay spearheaded the "Venice Orchid Project." Orchid divisions are purchased by the Society from a local grower and volunteer members mount the plants in the late spring (May-June) before the rainy season begins allowing the plants to establish in the trees. In addition to purchased plants, society members have been donating divisions of epidendrums, dendrobiums, brassavolas, encyclias and other Florida-friendly orchids. To date, more than 200 orchids have been placed in city parks and trees to promote interest in, and conservation of, Florida-friendly orchids.

Jay is currently the Society's vice-president in charge of Displays and enjoys creating artistic orchid exhibits with his display team. Jay lives in Venice Florida (nvrbdun@verizon.net).