

A WINNING ORCHID

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Over the years I've taught many, many classes and workshops on orchids, orchid growing, orchid repotting, etc. I've answered thousands of questions, seen orchid shows, visited small orchid growers, and orchid retailers. But I had never seen a large, commercial orchid growing operation. So earlier this year, I organized a business trip for myself to consult the source, "The Orchid Island" - the big island of Hawaii.

While there I had the opportunity to visit many large growers and observe their practices, differences and similarities. I wanted to see for myself how and what these huge commercial orchid growers do. I had many, many questions: What potting media do they use? Who are their big customers? What bugs are common, and how do they deal with them? What new varieties are on the horizon?!?!?

I was especially interested to know if there were attempts being made to cultivate new orchid varieties more adapted to *houseplant like conditions*, e.g. lower light, average room temperatures. One answer I received to this question that really surprised me resulted from my amazing visit with Glen Barfield, the president of The OrchidWorks, an orchid growing, research and development company. This is a top-notch, spic-and-span operation became even more impressive to me when I learned that even Glen's grandkids have orchids named after them!

So we started talking, and early on he remarked that no one had ever asked him if there were any new orchid varieties bred to rebloom in lower light conditions. That surprised me, and I was even more surprised when he continued, "I grow disposable home decorations."

WOW! I suddenly had the flash that this is all about business. Sure, he has his own private collection of stunning orchids, but business is business. He said, "I can't be concerned with how well the plant will grow and rebloom once it leaves here. I also can't be concerned with how an orchid might be judged by the American Orchids Society, for instance." Hmm...

"All we're interested in here are winning orchids!" Naturally I'm instantaneously curious to know his definition of a winning orchid, and no sooner had this thought came to my mind, when he began to offer, "And let me tell you what we see as a winning orchid."

Ok!!! Here we go. It's as if I'm sitting with my sadhu guru holy man along the Ganges, and he's about to tell me *the* secret to the universe.

"A winning orchid must [my comments in brackets]: (1) catch your eye [so that you'll notice it when you're speeding through the grocery store]; (2) go from 'flask

to finish' in 2 years or less – typically 18 months [the more they handle/water a plant, profits decrease]; (3) have a spike less than 30" tall so they fit on my shipping racks."

Well, I asked for it; I did want to see how a large, commercial orchid operation works. In one way this seemed a bit disappointing from an orchid enthusiast's standpoint, and at the same time seemed totally like common sense. I just hadn't considered the big picture before, and now I saw it. This is all about money. Orchids are often bought as cut flowers, and are definitely grown as *disposable home decorations*. What happens after these disposable home decoration once they finish blooming *cannot* be a concern in this realm.

That was only a small bit of our visit which I really enjoyed. I saw some of his private collection; new attempts at breeding; new trends in potting media; local orchid pests like the shore fly. I learned the most from Glen during my visit to Hawaii, and I am grateful to him for setting aside time to meet with me. I'll be seeing him again in August when I return for the largest orchid show of the year on the big island of Hawaii!!

As I drove away and processed our conversation, a bunch of questions began to run through my mind. How do the commercial growing practices of selecting "a winning orchid" affect the gene pool of a particular genus or species? Meaning that if longevity is of no concern, might this allow for the random introduction of genes that limit fitness, fecundity or longevity in that population? Could these orchid practices create genetic weaklings that would likely affect natural populations, if these orchids are ever liberated back to their native habitats?

And what does this spell for the confidence of future novice orchid enthusiasts? If large commercial growing practices "take over," could it mean that orchids will be more difficult to get to rebloom? And what about long graceful arching sprays of 3-4 foot flower spikes? Will they be no more?

Today's speedy, materially driven, disposable society continues to sustain companies like The OrchidWorks. Think of them the next time you purchase your inexpensive, disposable home decoration at Trader Joe's.

Today's world still needs small, local growers for orchid hobbyists/enthusiasts who frequent independent orchid retailers. Some people prefer orchids whose more subdued flowers who do not scream at you as if to proclaim "I'm a flower!" Your favorite local nursery may charge a little more, because, in part, they likely do not want to be limited to selling orchid plants with spikes under 30". We need the smaller scale growers and retailers to find for us new varieties that, though they don't make the cut at a mass commercial scale, satisfy our mysterious need/challenge to successfully grow orchids year after year.

What is a winning orchid to you?

Postscript: If you're wondering whether Glen *did* mention any new(er) orchids/hybrids/varieties bound to take the world by storm, he did. Watch for *Beallara* Tropic Lily 'Ice Palace,' and look up online the story about the "discovery" of *Phragmipedium kovachii*.