

# Orchid obsession



**The bold colours** and patterns in seemingly endless variety make this type of flower worth the meticulous effort needed to grow it, fans say

“The leaves were blackish green and the flower itself was glossy yellow, the yellow of a newly waxed taxi, and it was spattered with hundreds and hundreds of burgundy flecks. The flecks were slightly ovoid, and they were clustered in curving rows so that they looked as if they had been painted on as the flower spun around.”

Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*

BY DONNA NEBENZAHL  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

They can be pure white or extravagantly coloured, their pouting lower lips framed in bold tones or pastel wash, sometimes spotted or striped. They are members of the largest flowering plant family in the world, with an estimated 30,000 species worldwide and more than 100,000 hybrids.

Living in every habitat save the ocean floor, orchids are native to cloud forests and semi-desert, seashore and tundra. Their exotic beauty – frilled and fringed, in every colour of the rainbow – has so fascinated plant hunters that orchids have been torn from forest floor and tree branch, some never to be seen again.

The vast array of these extraordinary flowers that continue to appear are the object of delight to orchid growers around the world, including a good number in Montreal where several orchid societies have taken root.

Here, growers nurture their unique plants, differentiated from all other flowering plants because of the fusion of the male and female portion of the flower and because every orchid flower is symmetrical, with an outer whorl of three sepals and inside that a whorl of three petals. One of them – the labellum or lip – is specialized for attracting pollinators in myriad unique ways and considered the most spellbinding part of the orchid flower.

Casting a spell may be the only way to describe the trance in which orchid lovers move, nurturing and caring for their plants. It's not time consuming but it is meticulous work, they say, and the rewards are well worth the effort.

PHOTO: JOHN KENNEY THEGAZETTE

**Brian Dunbar** with a cattleya hybrid Kelly Lee, one of 250 orchids he grows in a temperature- and humidity-controlled addition to his home.



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"Orchids are just the top as far as flowers are concerned, even if they're somewhat difficult to grow," says Alan Sankey, a plant lover who gave up all his other indoor plants when orchids entered his life eight years ago.

They're so special with so much variety that the challenge of growing them is amply rewarded by the beauty the orchid gives back, he says. "It has such an exotic aura – it's otherworldly."

Now Sankey grows about 200 orchids, preferring the cool-growing ones native to the lower Himalayas and upper Andes. "Contrary to what people believe, most orchids don't grow in hot, humid places but in mountain habitats," he says. "They live where there are great variations of temperature and a lot of humidity."

His cool-growing favourites are Masdevallias and Oncidiums, which he grows in his Mont Tremblant home in front of two south-facing patio doors and three big bay windows. "They do take a certain amount of care," he says. "I spend at least 15 minutes every day poking around and watering them, and when it comes to repotting time, sometimes you're working for a couple of hours."

Most days you'll find Dollard des Ormeaux resident

Brian Dunbar caring for the 250 orchids he grows in a temperature- and humidity-controlled addition to his home – a few hours several times a week, he says, and a few more hours checking for new growth or problems.

Orchids want humidity and warmth most of the time, says the retired math teacher who is also president of the Eastern Canada Orchid Society, but there's always a catch with this delicately beautiful species.

Tuesday of every week, he moves his plants to the industrial kitchen sink in the room and soaks them with water mixed with fertilizer. "I vary the fertilizer 15-30-15 for blooms (high nitrogen) alternating with 20-20-20 for balance," he says. "I hose them right down, 52 litres of water each time, until the water runs through the pot. Once a month I use plain water to flush the system and get rid of salt buildup."

Some orchids are "terrestrial," growing in earth, but most are "epiphytes," he says, which means they grow in the wild on branches of trees or on rocks with the root system in the open. Growing medium often contains western tree bark or the flowers can grow entirely without medium, on a slab of cork or wood.

"In the wild they take nutrients from the air, or the plant they're living on."



PHOTO COURTESY ALAN SANKEY

**"Most orchids** don't grow in hot, humid places but in mountain habitats," Alan Sankey says.

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PHOTO COURTESY ALAN SANKEY

**This *Phalaenopsis bellina*** was bought as a leftover at an orchid show. “It was a bit mangled, but it was what I wanted,” Sankey says. “Now it always gets first prize when I bring it to a show.”

Not only are orchids beautiful, many are very long lasting, he says, like the *Dendrobium* that has been in bloom for three to four months. Others are sequential, with a dozen flowers each blooming for two weeks. “You’ve always got a plant in bloom and the blooms are always different,” he says.

Like so many people, Dunbar and his wife received an orchid as a gift. That was in February 1997, he says. “We had a dozen by June.” Not long after, they built a solarium with special heat mirror glass that keeps the heat out in the summer and inside in the winter.

The biggest part of his collection, 50 to 60 plants, are known as *Cattleya*, the majority originally found on the tops of tall trees in the wet forests of mainland tropical America.

Orchids are always the topic of conversation for the 65 members of the Eastern Canada Orchid Society, formally established in 1953, ranging from rank beginners to orchid experts and judges like Judy Adams, who has been growing orchids since 1985. Since her husband died six years ago, her substantial collection has been reduced by more than half – to nearly 600 plants.

“I specialize in tropical slipper orchids,” she says, “but when they’re in flower I love them all.”

The couple had come from England, where flowers grow most of the year, and were delighted to discover that orchids do too. “We went to an orchid show in 1983, and then we started buying them,” she says. “It became a sickness.”

She found slipper orchids particularly easy to grow under fluorescent light. Then she began to learn more and more and by 1991, after seven years of study, became an accredited orchid judge. At the Botanical Gardens here in Montreal, she is in charge of training for the American Orchid Society Judging Centre. “Basically, you have to be knowledgeable about most of the major genera, an eye for form and colour and continually looking for improvement.”

Because hybridization is thriving in the orchid world, the three judges who see flowers the third Saturday of every month have lots of changes to examine – more vivid colour, more patterns, size, form. In general, the flowers must be well shaped, not droopy or straggly, with wide open petals, symmetrical. “We look back at

previous awards and compare with the plant we're looking at," she says. "Every year there are thousands of new hybrids registered through the Royal Horticultural Society in Britain."

No longer the domain of the wealthy, orchid growing has enthusiasts among 20-somethings and the grey-haired set. These days, a simple orchid can be bought at Home Depot – and set off a quest for more exotic fare. Then orchid fanciers will find growers or attend a show like the society's annual orchid show where small growers from Canada and elsewhere bring plants for sale.

For those bitten by the orchid bug, it's a hands-on passion and one they like to share, says orchid grower Sankey. "I always bring a few orchids to expositions. It's wonderful to look at them yourself, but it's nice to share them."

One Cinderella story he loves to tell is of the leftover orchid he bought at the annual orchid show. "It was a bit mangled, but it was what I wanted – a Phalaenopsis bellina, purple and green, a beautiful flower. I took it and brought it home and it got stronger and stronger. Now it always gets a first prize when I bring it to a show.

"House plants are nice, but orchids are so much better."

**Orchidfête 2010**, hosted by the Eastern Canada Orchid Society will be held at the Hotel Espresso (formerly the Days Inn Hotel), 1005 Guy St., Saturday, Oct. 23, from noon to 6 p.m. and Sunday, Oct. 24, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tickets are \$8, \$6 for children under 12. ■



PHOTOS: JOHN KENNEY THE GAZETTE

**A Doritaenopsis Queen Beer** at Dunbar's home.



**Cattleyas** mostly originate from the tops of tall trees in wet forests of tropical America.

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