

Guidelines for Purchasing Orchid Plants Via Mail Order

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THE PURCHASE OF ORCHID PLANTS can be one of the most rewarding experiences a hobbyist can have, or it can be fraught with disappointment from the point of purchase until the time the plant has bloomed. Since numerous people have asked how they can have more assurance when they purchase plants by mail, I have been encouraged to list a few suggestions that may serve as guidelines.

At no other time in orchid history has there been such great diversity of orchids offered to the individual, and at prices comparatively reasonable when compared with other of today's skyrocketing costs. A cursory glance through any of the orchid publications bears out the fact that one may purchase species from every corner of the globe and almost any hybrid that crosses your mind, in addition to mericlones of the world's finest proven clones. Historically, there have been very few orchid businesses whose major livelihood was derived from the sale of orchid plants alone. Traditionally, these growers were primarily producers of cut-orchid blooms for the floral trade and sold orchid plants only incidentally. Within the past few years, the market place has changed and scores of small businesses have appeared from the hobbyist ranks. Many are respected hybridists with quality plants to offer, while yet others have simply entered into the business field in an attempt to offset some of the expenses incurred in the pursuit of their hobby.

As one scans the volume of plants offered for sale, one cannot help but cautiously wonder if the plants ordered will be vigorous, have a well-established root system, actually be of the size quoted, and have half the potential claimed in the advertisement.

Among the first things to consider in preparation of ordering would be to choose items that will grow well in your environment. Do not order cool-growing *odontoglossums*, *masdevallias* or *miltonias* if you cannot create and maintain fairly consistent nights of 50-55° F and days of 75-85° F. There is a wealth of species and hybrids that will do well under your specific conditions and frequently they are similar in general appearance to the plant to which you were originally attracted. For example, if you like the *Odontoglossum* group, purchase hybrids in the *Wilsonara*, *Odontocidium* or the warmer *Vuykstekeara* group. They are similar in overall appearance, but they may be grown at intermediate temperatures: nights of 55-60° F, and days of 80-90° F.

When considering a purchase, ascertain the general reputation of the company from which you are about to purchase. If they are not already known to you, check with other knowledgeable hobbyists or commercial growers in your area as to the overall reputation of the firm.

In choosing a specific plant, you will undoubtedly be drawn to it by one of several obvious reasons. If a photograph stimulates your interest, check its color by using basic known factors seen in most photos, i.e., color of leaves, stems or plant stakes in the background of the picture. They are often good reference points to the true flower color as those colors do not vary as much in photo reproduction as do the bloom colors themselves. Perhaps it is the parentage of the hybrid that captures your attention having viewed other hybrids with one or more of those parents involved.

Make certain the plant is described adequately. For example, the description may say "expect reds". Since there is a distinct difference between cerise or purple-

red and scarlet to orange-red with no "blue" overtones, ask the hybridizer for a bit more of a description.

Are the blooms to be large? (Compared to what?) "Cocktail-sized? (What is meant here?) Cluster, or standard-sized?

Plants are often offered by pot size alone and the plants within these pots can vary in size tremendously. If recently potted, plants in a three-inch pot may actually be of the two-inch pot size and fill only a small portion of the pot. Or you may get bonus-sized plants overflowing the stated pot size.

Frequently the plants are offered by leaf span, measured from one leaf tip across the breadth of the plant to opposite leaf tip. If listed by number of bulbs, what are their sizes, and compared to what? Are bulbs mature or are they primary seedlings or bulblets that have not yet reached their mature plant size? Be aware of the growth habits of either one or both of the parent plants involved in order to ascertain whether or not the plant offered is of good value.

If not familiar with the terminologies often used by plant sellers — some wordage may be confusing — the phrase "blooming-size" can lead to questions. This generally infers that the plant is capable, but not guaranteed, of blooming on the present growth or the one currently developing.

Among the most important features deliberated when contemplating the purchase of an unbloomed seedling is the ability to choose a hybrid cross from which you have a fair opportunity to bloom either an exhibition-quality flower or that ever-sought-after award plant. Only experience can be the guideline here, and hybridizers themselves cannot always provide that answer. Experience comes from a considerable amount of observation of plant forum tables, award publications, and personal knowledge of the breeding successes of one or more of the parent plants versus the failures.

Does the company offering the plants have a time-tested good reputation as a hybridizer or grower of species? Since we cannot possibly know each of the many firms personally, we must evaluate them by word of mouth, articles they have written, or previous hybrids made. While most are very reputable, there are those who set seed pods on practically everything that pops into bloom in order to have seedlings to offer for sale for an immediate cash flow. Some are simply "pot plant" growers, breeding everything in sight to produce pretty blooms for the general public. Thankfully, most who advertise are dedicated hybridizers endeavoring to improve the breed.

Will the plant be shipped bare root or in pot? Growers vary their means of shipment often thinking they are saving their customers money by shipping bare root and avoiding the cost of a heavier, more bulky shipment. Unless you are an experienced grower knowing how to treat bare root plants upon arrival, and have adequate facilities for immediate potting, always receive plants "in pot". Young seedlings usually are in smaller pots; therefore, their weight and bulk is little and shipping costs at a minimum. Without doubt, plants travel better with less shock when retained in their original pots. If you are an experienced grower and know you will be repotting upon arrival anyway, and the plant is mature, you may want to save yourself shipping costs and have the plant shipped bare root.

Most companies require payment in advance unless you are well known to them. Some will include a means whereby you may calculate the cost of freight by zone or a percentage of the total cost of the order. Others will bill you for the freight costs after they can calculate the actual cost of shipment. Some special offers are post-paid, but most are freight due.

When purchases are made from outside the United States, a special import permit is required and a specially issued stamp must be sent to the importer to be affixed to the incoming shipment. This permit may be secured by writing the U. S.

Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, (APHIS), Federal Center Building, Hyattsville, Maryland 20782, and by asking for an Import Permit for plants. All plants entering the U.S.A. must be sent to an authorized port of entry, where they will be inspected and treated with an insecticide. Special permits may be required for species listed as endangered.

Upon arrival of your shipment, unpack the plants carefully and spread the packing material so as not to miss any plant. Check each plant off the packing list as it is unpacked. Observe if the packing material was adequate, plants well identified, not too wet (never wrapped in plastic) and well protected. Decide if the plants are of good value for the money expended.

When ordering flasks, always check the size of the flasks offered. Are they simply oversized glass tubes or the standard 500-cc flasks? Of utmost importance, how many plants and of what size are inside these flasks? More often than not, flasks are listed as having 25 to 35 plants ready to be removed to community pots or very small single pots. Usually you receive a more-than-generous count for your money.

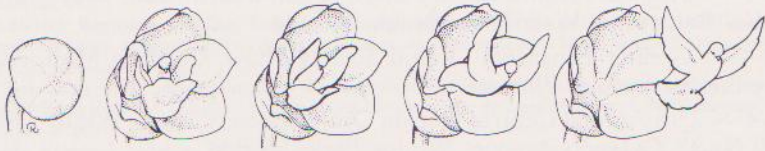
Terminologies used by people offering flasks can vary, but the following are terms used most frequently. "Mother flask" is the original flask in which the seed was sown. These usually contain hundreds, if not thousands, of very tiny plantlets of very small size, all crowded together. A "plated" or "transplanted" flask is the type normally offered for sale and contains the 25 to 50 plants that have been removed from the mother flask, spread over the surface of the agar in another flask and allowed to grow roots and leaves. These plants should be well-rooted and ready to be removed from the flask when offered for sale. A few firms are now offering "mini-flasks" that contain only a few plants at reduced prices. While many growers use the standard Erlenmeyer laboratory flasks, others use plasma bottles, milk bottles, and various other containers that withstand the sterilization process. When purchasing flasks, take into consideration the size of your available growing area. At first, plants from flasks take little room, but as they grow, they have a devastating way of eating up space. If space is a problem, perhaps you should "go partners" in the purchase of a flask with another hobbyist friend. Or, perhaps consider some of the smaller-growing hybrids instead of the large flamboyant types; i.e., a *sophrolaeliocattleya* rather than a *brassolaeliocattleya* or *Phalaenopsis equestris* hybrid rather than a large, standard, white *phalaenopsis* or a miniature *cymbidium* rather than the large-foilage, standard type.

When ordering species, ascertain whether they are freshly collected "jungle plants" that frequently are somewhat scruffy-looking and not yet rooted, or are they well-established and rooted plants? Are they a "home-hybridized" selfing of a selected species, or two selected species mated together, or are they the natural collected species clones? Of course, they could be meristems of a selected clone of a species.

It appears that with the rising costs of catalog publication, we will find an increasing amount of advertisers using orchid publications such as the A.O.S. BULLETIN, noting that the August 1981 issue of the A.O.S. BULLETIN carried 161 advertisers of orchid products and related items. There is growing evidence that publications such as this may well replace the once eagerly-sought-after orchid catalog. We will miss the catalogs, but, if you are like myself, I eagerly scan the BULLETIN Table of Contents to locate the advertising section, where I spend my first half-hour of reading.

Isn't it wonderful that in this jet age we can sit in our living room and peruse orchid advertisements from every corner of the world, send our order, and, within days, receive plants that once grew halfway around the world!

Some folks enjoy the challenge and thrill of gambling. Orchid fanciers have it one up on the gambler. They can enjoy that challenge and thrill, yet they never lose. You always have something to show for your efforts, and most people think it is something very special. — 7529 Tina Place, Dublin, California 94566.



Contributions to the A.O.S. Fund in January

THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS of the A.O.S. Fund is greatly encouraged to see increasing donations for such outstanding projects as the A.O.S. new home, the new A.O.S. film and the Orchid Identification Center. They thank all the generous contributors this month with particular appreciation to the Houston Orchid Society, the Fort Worth Orchid Society and the Oregon Orchid Society for their most welcome assistance.

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1. In appreciation of the A.O.S. film "The Orchid and the Grower."
2. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Warren Kelly, in memory of James R. Kelly, designated for use at the Orchid Identification Center.
3. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Ted Gallagher, designated for use at the O.I.C.
4. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Emly Siegerist, designated for use at the O.I.C.
5. In memory of Len Lassin's mother.
6. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Irene Van Alstyne, towards the establishment of a new home for the A.O.S. in West Palm Beach, Florida.
7. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Jerry Shelton, designated for use at the O.I.C.
8. In memory of Marge Cowgill, designated for use at the O.I.C.
9. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Tom Barry.
10. In honor of Kay Bogden, to the A.O.S. new home fund.
11. To defray costs of the new A.O.S. film "The Many Worlds of Orchids."
12. Designated for use at the Orchid Identification Center.
13. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Maurice Powers.
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15. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Bob Webster, Jr.
16. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Merritt Huntington, to the film fund.
17. In lieu of speakers' fees for Bill Thomas and Paul Bechtel.
18. In memory of Philip T. Sharples, to the new home fund.
19. In memory of Richard W. Peterson.
20. In lieu of a speaker's fee for Milton Carpenter, to the new home fund.
21. Towards the establishment of a new home for the A.O.S. in West Palm Beach, Florida.