

Limited Editions in Orchids?

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AMONG THE MOST POPULAR PASTIMES Americans have today is the purchase of special collector items manufactured in limited quantities. There appears to be a special mystique surrounding limited edition products; it is a strange development in the United States marketing arena which is accustomed to selling mass quantities to mass consumers.

Americans are collectors! It is reported, for example, by the magazine *Plate Collector*, that there are an estimated 3,900,000 collectors of plates in the United States. Collector plates have been popular since 1895 when a Danish company issued its first Christmas plate. Now, collector plates are issued to celebrate almost any event. "Limited edition" automobiles, special edition containers for the holiday packaging of liquor and cosmetics, commemorative coins and many other popular items are a part of this uniquely American mania.

The limited edition product is even beginning to make inroads into the orchid business. Through the advent of "mericlone," it is now possible to reproduce a specific, desirable orchid clone in any quantity desired. Where hobbyists once were forced to place their name on seemingly interminable lists of collectors vying for a division of a highly-selected, exhibition orchid, mericlone has provided the means by which all customers may receive a division of the desired plant at the same time.

As in all newly-introduced, revolutionary products, the urgency of getting into the mericlone production of orchids in order to promote sales had an early effect upon the quality of plants offered for sale. During the first few years of mericlone, orchid growers, excited by tantalizing visions of massive bank accounts, grasped the finest clones they found in their inventory and meristemmed, often without sufficient evaluation. Improvements shortly began. Growers became more sophisticated in their selection, more factual in the quantity of each clone propagated, and, thankfully, more conscious of virus and its eradication from any mericlone orchid plant offered for sale.

Mericlone, in itself, is obviously not the complete answer to "limited editions," for all one needs to do is to purchase a single mericlone and have that plant reproduced, thereby endlessly perpetuating that specific clone. Presently growers who merchandise orchids have only one means of control over their mericlone introductions. Tight control must be exercised to ensure that the complete lot of plants is grown to a specific size, and to a sales price that will be acceptable to their market, before the clone is introduced for sale. Orchid growers realize that once a single plant is sold on the open market, their control of that plant, its future propagation and sale, is lost forever. Anyone could, if they desired, re-propagate and undersell the original merchandiser. Without doubt, "limited editions" will become effective only when copyright protection, and/or orchid plant patenting, is accepted into the trade. If a plant propagator and merchandiser can have the assurance that a specific orchid clone, upon which he has secured patent rights, cannot be sold or propagated without written permission, then, and only then, can he offer controlled "limited editions."

It is conceivable that within the ranks of the dedicated orchid collectors the market of abundance may give way to the marketing of scarcity. That is to say that the exceptionally choice clones may be propagated only in the very small quantities to command premium prices. And, with the control of patent rights, these choice orchid clones could not foreseeably be resold without permission, poten-

tially driving their individual cost even higher. The introduction of "commemorative" clones is not beyond the realm of possibility, as innovative orchid merchandisers name clones to feature notable orchid personalities or happenings to intrigue and satisfy the emotional involvement of orchid collectors. An example might encompass such renowned personalities as Gordon Dillon, Rodney Wilcox Jones or the forthcoming Tenth World Orchid Conference in South Africa, to name but a few. Throughout history, the Olympic Games have been observed by the creation of official coins, stamps and medallions, which rank among the rarest and most valuable of all commemoratives. Is it possible that orchid conferences will gain such popularity among orchidists?

"Limited editions" may or may not become popular among orchid collectors, but something upon which we can always rely is the assurance that due to the tremendous variety found within the orchid tribe, creativity in market introductions will always play a growing role in our total marketing mix. — 7259 Tina Place, Dublin, California 94566.

