

Progress Depends Upon Curiosity

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HAVE YOU EVER FOUND YOURSELF ALONE among your orchids imagining that you have just created the first velvety green *Phalaenopsis*? Have you fantasized that there were 20 iridescent blue *Cattleya* blooms majestically displayed on gracefully arching *Cymbidium*-like spikes? Have you ever wished for five-inch, crisp carnation-red *Cattleya* flowers displayed on a plant only eight inches tall? Oh, the secret dreams I've nurtured about my own seedlings! A new father couldn't be more proud on viewing his first-born child than the orchidist anticipating the first seedling of the long-awaited hybrid as it ever so slowly unfolds its marvelous beauty.

Progress is what dreams are all about.

In order to attain that vision, dream or thought that passes through your mind, it takes some action on your part. Is there a slight possibility that the image seen by your mind could become a reality? I am convinced that much of the fulfillment we find in the hybridizing, growing, and blooming of seedlings comes from the pursuit of floral perfection as we each interpret that image in our mind. Inherent in every person is that strong and persuasive desire to be partners with nature in producing a flower so strikingly beautiful and distinctly different from all others that our peers will gasp in admiration at what we have produced. So dreams, curiosity, and challenge, if followed by action, are truly the mother of progress.

It is a well-known fact that some folk are simply more curious than others. When orchidists feel that a plateau has been attained in the hybridizing of a particular genus, the curious begin to seek out new and distinctly different avenues of breeding, often involving intergeneric and multigeneric hybrids. Frequently these new hybrids are in combination with clones that have apparently already reached near-perfection, yet many are a return to the species or primary hybrids of another genus to combine those with the advanced near-perfect hybrids once thought to be the ultimate.

Without doubt, some of these combinations are simply a result of curious hybridizers anxious to find compatibility between hybrid groups. There are others diligently searching for the key that will allow them to proceed in a carefully, well-thought-out breeding program.

In the breeding of orchids, the passage of time becomes a major deterrent and, too often, the prime cause for dissolution of concentrated efforts. Observing that the average American changes his residence as often as every five years, we must recognize that to embark on a long-range goal of intergeneric hybridization often is to commit oneself seriously to a lifetime goal. During that lifetime, work patterns as well as residences may change and life's priorities may well deter any well-intended goals.

As I look back on my own lifetime involvement in orchids, I note a vein of consistency in those who grow these exotic plants. Many stick with it, often through severe hardships, their orchids becoming a quiet, stabilizing influence on their lives. As we observe those who have pursued their orchid interest over a period of many years, several factors come to the fore as being influential in their lives. Man-and-wife teams lead those who derive the utmost satisfaction from their mutual interest in orchids. Professionals in the general medical and law practices tend to find great satisfaction in orchids as a hobby. Of course, the professionals in the general field of

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plant sciences are bound to become addicted, followed by endless scores of other individuals who have discovered not only the intrigue and challenge of growing orchids but, equally as important, they have found scores of other folk who are eager to share their compelling interest.

Most of us can recall a person in our lifetime who greatly influenced the direction and ultimate career choices we have made. Without doubt, Ernest Hetherington was that person in my orchid career. In 1946, as a young man fresh from military service and experiencing the second of my "on-the-job-training" stints in orchids, I found myself under the supervision of Ernest, whose previous orchid training at Armacost and Royston had secured his position as manager of the newly established Fred Stewart Orchid Company. As I reach the golden years of maturity, I look back to those 17 formative years of training and the lessons of Ernest as he ever so patiently instructed me in the multifaceted aspects of orchids as a business. For me, the high point of those early years in orchids was the sharing of Ernest's gifted abilities in hybridizing. I do not recall whose idea it was to begin the practice of playing the game of "devil's advocate" in regards to the hybrids being considered at Stewart's, but I do know it helped me tremendously in my growth as a potential hybridizer.

As I recall, this was the system used: A specific cross was presented for discussion by Ernest, who opened by outlining the major positive reasons for making the combination of parents. My position was to challenge his specific reasoning by pointing out the negative features of such a cross; i.e., the color of the tepals of that clone might be satisfactory but in previous hybrid combinations the color had been recessive and had allowed muddiness to occur. Or, in the case of *Cymbidium* Lillian Stewart, the parent *Cymbidium* Carisona 'Glendessary' possessed a fine rose color but the blooms were small, bunched on the stem and often did not face outward on the spike. Admittedly, it did take a bit of study and a great amount of observation on my part to have the fortitude to challenge my teacher. But I was encouraged to do so. Often, following much discussion, the proposed hybrid was tabled to be looked at afresh during another session. Or Ernest and I would switch roles and I would present the positive and he would endeavor to seek out any negative features. This system, involving two personalities, evidently worked well and resulted in such *Cattleya* alliance hybrids as *Sophrolaeliocattleya* Jewel Box, *Slc.* Paprika, *Brassolaeliocattleya* Fortune, *Blc.* Fortune Teller, *Blc.* Golden Slippers, and *Potinara* Carrousel as well as in such *Cymbidium* hybrids as Flirtation, Lillian Stewart, San Francisco, Bethlehem, Khyber Pass, and many more.

"Ah", you say, "but those two people must think alike." Those who know both Ernest and myself will readily testify that we have distinctly different personalities and are often at opposite ends of discussions. We simply embraced one primary goal that we both believed to be of far greater importance than our own self-gratification. That was to make the best possible hybrids that we could for the company we represented. In achieving that, Stewart's would gain stature within the trade and with that we could share in the knowledge and satisfaction that we had done our job well. However, more frequently than not, because of the lengthy time involved in the blooming of hybrids, the contributions of many orchid hybridizers are not recognized during their lifetime. But the hybrids they introduced often determine the success of future generations.

Some of you may point out that this seemingly altruistic attitude is not the norm within the human species, that each of us seeks personal recognition rather than the overall improvement of the orchids we hybridize. To answer that possibility, let me outline some procedures to follow as an approach to your own hybridizing efforts:

First, determine the breadth and scope of your involvement in the hybridizing of the genus that attracts you:

Limited Involvement: A few seedlings to be grown out of curiosity and personal entertainment for yourself and a few close friends.

Advanced Hobbyist: In search of new and distinct departures with possibilities of limited gifts to friends and small sales to orchid societies. Quantity to be determined by breeding stock and space available.

Scientific Research: Dependent on stage of plant development to be researched; i.e. flask, seedlings, mature plants, flowers, etc. Available greenhouse space determines quantity grown.

Commercial Growers: In search of new and distinct marketable varieties to be utilized in further hybridizing efforts, outstanding plants to be cloned, cut flower or pot plant production. Quantity to be raised determined by space available in conjunction with methods and scope of sales projected; i.e., retail hobbyist mail order and walk-in trade, wholesale cut flowers, wholesale pot plants, and the variety of genera involved in an overall program.

Since the majority of the readers of this publication are primarily interested in orchid hybridizing from the viewpoint of the amateur or advanced hobbyist, let me offer further guidelines:

1. If at all possible, find at least one other person interested in the same genera you intend to hybridize and develop a close relationship with him or her. This relationship grows to immeasurable value as a source of enthusiasm, information, and general friendship as you support each other's interest in a common goal.

2. Determine what you seek to attain in an overall breeding program and, more specifically, the individual hybrids you wish to make. Determine the size of flowers, tepal and labellum forms desired, color, and quantity of flowers per stem, stem length, substance and texture of flowers.

3. Check *Sander's List of Orchid Hybrids*, *Bishop's Interim List of Orchid Hybrids* by James R. Fisher, the various *Orchid Parade* publications of Elinor Yocom, and other orchid references to ascertain whether your proposed hybrid or similar hybrids have already been registered. Research all information found.

4. Check the *American Orchid Society Register of Awards* or AWARDS QUARTERLY for any possible description of immediate or past parents involved, endeavoring to note as many of the dominant and recessive characteristics of all parentage; i.e., color domination or recessiveness, lip form and color, recurving of petals, poor stems, etc.

5. If not familiar with both proposed parents, seek further information from close orchid friends, orchid society members, commercial growers or A.O.S. judges.

6. When making your proposed hybrid, pollinate fresh flowers and make reciprocal crosses as insurance. Frequently, a cross will produce fertile seed on one parent but not the other.

7. If one flower is considerably smaller than the other, put the pollen from the larger onto the stigma of the smaller. Pollen from the small flower may develop pollen tubes too short to reach into the ovary of the larger flower.

8. Cover the pollen mass with the sticky semi-fluid from the stigmatic cavity.

9. Should you wish to make a specific hybrid whose parents do not bloom at the same time, you may store pollen for approximately six months in your kitchen refrigerator until the time arrives when the mother plant is in bloom. Insert pollinia into a sealed glass tube or gelatin capsule and place in a screw-top glass container with some granules or capsules of calcium chloride to absorb any water vapor.

10. Should you require more information regarding the development of the seed

pod, Rebecca Northen, in her excellent book *Home Orchid Growing*, covers this subject thoroughly.

11. Finally, realize that to attain your outlined goals, you undoubtedly will be forced to compromise certain features in order to progress at all. That in itself should not be received with any note of discouragement for the rewards of orchid hybridizing cannot be measured by the results of hybrids alone. There is a depth of satisfaction known only to those who continually seek the ultimate of floral perfection with full knowledge that they are in partnership with the Creator of the universe.

In conclusion, I submit my revision of Edgar A. Guest's famous poem "A Package of Seeds":

ORCHID SEEDLING

I paid seven-fifty for this orchid from seed
And the grower assures me it's no gyp.
"We've got 'em assorted for every man's need,"
He said with a smile on his lip.
"Catts and phalies, vandas and cynoches,
Seven-fifty a seedling and pick as you please."

Seedlings mean dollars to the grower, I'm told,
And dollars are the things that he needs.
I've purchased before from one to tenfold
But thought of them as merely from seed.
But it flashed through my mind as I ordered ten (to be thrifty),
"You've purchased a miracle here for only seven-fifty."

You've seven-fifty's worth of power which no man can create,
You've seven-fifty's worth of life in your hand,
You've seven-fifty's worth of mystery, destiny and fate,
Which the wisest cannot understand.
In this little pot, now isn't it odd
You've seven-fifty's worth of orchid, known only to God."

— With apologies to Edgar A. Guest

