

Growing Orchids

Not long ago, I casually mentioned to a long-distance friend that I grow orchids. He expressed such amazement at this improbable accomplishment that I realized the words, growing orchids, must conjure up such meanings as exotic, sophisticated, delicate, and complex. Far from it!

To set the record straight, and lay the groundwork for this easy essay, I have seven orchid plants – two purple and five white – growing in the southeast corner windows of my bedroom. Fall is their budding season, and each day I carefully scrutinize the stems, looking for new shoots or signs that might foretell the possibility a new one. Today, I counted 10 shoots, which, if orchid nature runs true to course, should yield 50 blossoms by Valentine's Day – a new personal record. Based on past experience, each blossom should last two months or more, and many will last twice that. What a treat lies in store for the owners of orchid plants.

Even from my early years, I admired orchids but never imagined growing them myself. After all, I had no special training, I didn't own a hothouse, and I didn't know one species from another. Without much disappointment, I accepted these limitations as simply another of life's realities that were not in the realm of the possible. Perhaps I had seen too many movies that portrayed the sophisticated, well-bred, somewhat eccentric, and (of course) very wealthy mansion owner puttering about in his hothouse, which was filled with several hundred orchid plants, all very rare one-of-a-kind species. These movies used orchids as part of the story line, to raise the specter of mystery and even foreshadow tragedy. Frequently, the orchid nursery itself became the setting for the discovery of a corpse or the scene of a hair-raising, and sometimes violent, confrontation. I was always relieved when that part of the movie had passed.

My orchid-growing conversion experience took place in a mom-and-pop corner grocery store owned by a middle-aged couple, Korean immigrants. One day, ten years ago, in need of a Pepsi fix, I happened by Royal Market on T Street. Fishing the money out of my pocket and laying it on the counter, I spotted two orchid plants with several blossoms sitting on a shelf opposite the cash register. Are those orchids, I asked? In her Korean accent, she acknowledged they were. I didn't think you could grow orchids like that!

Don't they require a lot of special care? She looked at the orchids, then slightly askance at me, shrugged her shoulders, and said, I no have problem. That was it; I was hooked. The mysterious, exotic, and yes, even snooty, image of growing orchids evaporated.

My first orchid plant was delivered from Capital Nursery, courtesy of my Boston daughter, Sarah. It arrived with a note announcing the coming of our fourth grandchild. It read: Number 4 is on the way, love from number 2. The plant did well. It stayed in bloom for several months, and then, one by one, each bloom withered and dropped. Now what? Is this the end, I wondered? I decided to wait it out. Six months later, a tiny shoot appeared. That was all the training I needed; I was in the orchid business at last.

I bought my first orchid plant from Capital Nursery on Freeport Boulevard. The sign on the door to the climate-controlled room read "Exotic Plants." There were a dozen orchids from which to choose – large, medium, or small; purple or white; and there was price to consider. I took my time, examining each orchid pot, making mental notes to myself about the relative characteristics of each. The large ones seemed too expensive, especially if the plant died a few days later, which might be a likely outcome since it would not be located in a hot and humid environment like this nursery room. Finally, I was ready. I chose a medium-size purple orchid, which had six as-yet-unopened buds. I figured that with any luck, the plant would last at least long enough to allow the buds to blossom. Let me announce here, my first orchid purchase has survived now five years, bearing blossoms each year, and again this year. Money well spent, I tell you.

Learning from my successful experience with two orchids, I added to my orchid collection, one at a time, until I received my first cautionary comment: Did you buy another orchid? I think we have enough. The only change I made in my selection was to veer in the direction of white. I have not experimented with other species and don't feel the need to do so. My innate desire to be in the presence of orchids seems to be satisfied.

It is only fair, I believe, to share some of my secrets for successfully growing orchids. The first secret is water. Never water more than once a week. Every Monday I take my orchids to the kitchen sink and run the water generously through the pots, leaving them to drain for an hour or so on the sideboard.

The second secret is fertilizer. I add a capful of Eleanor's VF-11 to a two-gallon watering can filled with water, and I water the roots thoroughly with the stream from the can. I also let the stream pour onto the leaves of the plant. The third secret is to prune cautiously, or not at all, during the dormant period. There you have it, my three secrets for growing orchids, at least the purple and the white ones.

I hesitate to generalize from any lessons learned in this essay about orchid growing, but as I make my way through the crowded aisles of the huge produce section at Raley's supermarket, filled with a wide variety of exotic and foreign-looking fruits, greens, and vegetables, it seems to me it would be helpful to have an immigrant stationed close by who would encourage me, with a helpful word of advice, to break the ice of my ignorance about how to prepare this produce. Even advice like "I no have problem" might be enough to push me over the edge.