

Conserving Our Collections: Planning for a Future

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The next time vacation rolls around will we be wondering “Who will take care of the orchids?” A family emergency requires us to be absent for days, weeks or even months: who can take care of our orchids? Tragedy strikes and a serious orchid collector dies suddenly: who will take care of that collection of orchids? These scenarios are well known to the orchid community yet there is little effective planning at the individual, family, or orchid society level to deal with the issue of vulnerable plants. Without careful planning and activation of those plans, orchid collections can be quickly lost to inappropriate care or theft, inclement weather, pests and diseases. Species in our collections should be of particular concern since they may not be easily replaced but healthy vigorous hybrids are important also, especially if they are unique individuals, not mericlones. While botanical gardens have contingency plans ready to implement in the case of emergency, and staffing plans to deal with vacation and illness, rarely are we similarly prepared. For the serious collector who truly cares about conservation, the message is simple: Plan, plan, plan and let someone know about those intentions.

Vacation planning should begin weeks or even months before the first day of the long awaited trip. We may cultivate a trusted neighbour to stand in during our absence. We may rely on family members or even hire a plant care business to do the work. In all cases, the caregiver must be provided with training and walked through the daily routine. Leave printed instructions and use visual clues such as coloured markers to highlight which plants require special care. We all know how a heavy hand at watering can spell death for some precious orchids. While an orchid babysitter may have concerns about damage to someone else’s orchids and property, and all may be forgiven if all that happens is a broken spike, it still pays to be cautious: friendships have been fractured over much less and there may be liability issues. Be certain that the caregiver has contact information, understands that you have a backup plan, and knows what to do in an emergency.

Contingency planning is needed for unexpected events including prolonged power outage, floods, storms and fire. Backup generators do provide power when we need it but we must already have a generator on hand as well as fuel to operate it until either power is restored or we have moved the orchids to a secure location. We may have only a short time to select plants to ‘save’ before evacuating to a safer location so it is a good idea to label the collection accordingly as is done in some public collections. Of course, if we must evacuate with little notice, saving orchids may be the least of our priorities. Sharing divisions of selected plants with growers at a distance is always a good way to reduce the risk of losing species rare in cultivation.

Succession planning is probably the least thought about but should be seriously considered by anyone having a collection of species or breeding stock. Even with detailed directions as to the care and disposition of a collection, unless others are informed of our intent, no one may learn of those wishes before the plants have died. It goes without saying that all plants should be labelled and that records should be copied to be stored somewhere safe.

Inheritance planning

For those inheriting orchids, the plants could represent a living remembrance of a loved one and their green thumb. The inheritor may know nothing about orchids but despite that is just managing to keep a very special plant alive. They are ready to do whatever to keep this living memory thriving but they need help. This is when orchid societies can assist whomever asks for help. Offering to repot the orchid or providing additional advice at a meeting would be welcome. Your good turn will turn into a learning experience for everyone and perhaps line up some new orchid friends for the grower and a new member for the society.

To summarize:

Plan for vacations Identify who can take care of your orchids when you are away. Discuss options with family, friends and neighbours. Ask for suggestions from orchid society members or contact house sitting businesses that also provide plant care services. Prepare a plant care schedule.

Plan for contingencies Consider how to take care of the orchids during a power failure, in summer heat or winter cold, or what plans to have in place if you suddenly become ill or have to evacuate the premises. Have a list of the most valuable plants which must be saved if at all possible. Mark these plants so that they may be quickly located and removed to safety.

Plan for succession Keep records up to date and plants labelled. Identify who you want to take care of your orchids once you no longer are able, be certain that they are willing, and share this information with your family or those ultimately responsible for your estate.