
Preface

We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well – for we will not fight to save what we do not love.

Stephen Jay Gould

In 1861, the year that Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated President of the United States, a Tiger orchid was planted across the world at the Singapore Botanic Gardens. It has seen the presidents of many countries come and go over the past 150 years, as that same original orchid is still thriving and currently on display for visitors of the twenty-first century and beyond. Similarly, some years later, a *Bulbophyllum ornatissimum*, purchased at an auction in 1887, found an agreeable home at the Glasnevin National Botanical Gardens in Dublin and has been growing there ever since.

An orchid produces new growth when the old growth withers and dies. Indeed, if properly cared for, this plant can grow indefinitely. This requires that the orchid grower replicate to a certain extent the growing conditions of its native habitat. Sometimes, those conditions are of steamy South American jungles or the montane rainforests of India, the highlands of New Guinea, the tropical dry forests of Mexico, or coastal lowlands of Brazil.

In a sense, orchids represent something we have lost. Many generations of our ancestors once lived in forested regions in close quarters with nature, but even for many of our grandparents, that might be only a distant memory. Yet traces of our natural heritage are still in our DNA, and so providing *Homo sapiens* with green sanctuaries is essential for coping with modern living.

Living as we do in our own urban jungle, many of us will never step foot in the places where such exotic orchids are endemic. Yet through the study and cultivation of such bizarre and beautiful plants, we can still honor the nature of these mysterious locations without ever leaving the familiarity of our own homes and gardens.

Orchids are like no other family of flowering plants. The endless diversity of form, color, and scent of their flowers; the unusual appearance of their vegetative growth – often with pseudobulbs beneath their leaves; and, of course, the unusual habit of a great many orchids (about 70%) found growing on the branches of trees as epiphytes, distinguish orchids as a fascinating group of flowering plants unlike any other on Earth.

For the above reasons, many people speak of growing orchids as they would of an intense addiction. Once you have started with a single plant, you quickly find yourself growing a second one, then three, then four, then before you know it, they have taken over your house and expanded into a separate greenhouse. Or perhaps you are among those who find themselves searching out or posting enumerable photographs of orchids on Facebook, Pinterest, Flickr, or other image and information-sharing websites such as the Orchid Board. In this day and age, you do not even have to grow orchids to become obsessed with them: an image of their exotic beauty alone is enough for some.

This book is intended for those who wish to embark on this long and slippery slope, or who perhaps already know a little about these unusual plants but now wish to deepen their knowledge in matters both technical and cultural. This is not a book about how to grow orchids – there are already many fine books on that subject. It is a book about the compelling and



Fig. 1 *Hummingbird Perched on the Orchid Plant*, painted by American artist Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904), captures the exotic romance of the jungle (WikiCommons)



Fig. 2 Central Park in New York as viewed from above. The urge to be near nature is always there (Image courtesy Martin St-Amant/Wiki Commons)

complex history, biology, and etymology of these exotic breeds, touching upon a slew of other intriguing subjects along the way. And of course, it is also a book about sex, since orchids have mastered more procreative techniques than are found in the *Kama Sutra*.

This book does not attempt to cover the many thousands of orchid genera and species. Instead, it seeks to paint a portrait of this exotic world through a selection of some of the most interesting and unusual orchids on Earth. Perhaps the reader's favorite exotic orchid is not included. Yet many others will be, so enjoy this fascinating and unfamiliar journey.

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