

Some Ethical Issues Surrounding Our Native Orchids in the Judging System

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Hardy terrestrial orchids are currently enjoying a surge in popularity among those growers daring enough to overlook their reputation as being notoriously difficult. Recent advancements in their propagation technology combined with a greater (yet far more complete) understanding of their underground mycological partners have provided a solid foundation for new cultural successes. The knowledge base for these orchids was once small and impractical, offering very little to the enterprising orchidist looking to glean whatever useful tidbits of information he might use in a cultural, as opposed to botanical, vein.

This is all changing.

More growers than ever before are choosing to take a chance and experiment with terrestrials. This is in part due to increased amounts of cultural information available to the first timer. It is, however, the propagative technology that must be given due credit for the increasing popularity of hardy terrestrials, for without it, there would be much less material available for such widespread use. We are not, as some might say, on the verge of a large scale commercialization of terrestrial orchids. Rather we are on a long pathway that could eventually lead to that, however, not before many years are spent furthering our incomplete understanding of their cultural as well as propagative needs, in addition to the dissemination of this information.

The increase presence of hardy terrestrials in collections around the globe presents some interesting issues that the judging community needs to address. It is a concern that cannot be ignored as the ranks of terrestrial growers will do nothing but swell, making their presence increasingly known at judging centers throughout our temperate regions.

It has been suggested by some that our native orchids should not be eligible for consideration for AOS awards. It is felt that such consideration would encourage collecting from the wild, and consequently place an increased monetary value on our native stocks, thereby further jeopardizing their already precarious existence. It is also argued that there is nothing preventing a party lacking in scruples from digging a plant in the wild and immediately bringing it to a judging center. This practice would indeed undermine the purpose of the judging system, which is in part to recognize quality or merit in *cultivated* plants. Potential awards of this type would knock the credibility of the entire judging system, detracting from all other legitimate awards.

It is further argued that because our native orchids simply cannot be grown successfully for extended periods, any plants seen at judging centers are indeed wild collected, or are gradually diminishing and not likely to be around for much longer and therefore not worthy for consideration.

The purpose of this article is to challenge this type of thinking, and perhaps provide sufficient grounds for doing so. Step back and look at things in a global perspective, as opposed to one that is restricted to our own backyard. With this broader outlook, reread the fifth paragraph and eliminate phrases such as "our native," changing the gist from our own orchids to just any orchid. You will see the standing credibility of the statements made. Using this reasoning, it is then true that any orchids, being native to our own country or not, ought to be left in the wild for their own continued wellbeing. It becomes

apparent that although grounded on sound principles, this type of thinking is faulty, for obvious reasons.

The negative impact the horticultural industry has had on wild populations of orchids is undeniable. Tens of thousands of plants have been taken from the wild, only eventually to perish in some far off and very unnatural greenhouse. The effects of this on respective ecosystems are far from completely understood; however, the one thing that is certain is that it is not good. Let me draw on a very recent and appropriate example, that of *Paphiopedilum sanderianum*. To its own eventual detriment this plant disappeared from cultivation for a number of years, perhaps for close to a century. Unfortunately, knowledge of its existence persisted, as did lingering images of this species, elevating it to legendary status. Who could blame industry for its insatiable appetite when rumors of its rediscovery surfaced? The voluminous dollars put forth by interested parties led to a Bornean feeding frenzy where the plants didn't stand a chance. We all know how currently widely available this plant is, as well as many of its successful hybrid progeny. We also know how unapologetically the entire judging system has embraced this species and its progeny, both highly questionable ethical origin. Is it not then hypocritical to spurn our own, less threatened (in most cases) species on moral grounds? The scrutiny of the judging system should not be confined to any political border.

Although the detriments of collecting any plant from the wild are obvious, the benefits warrant attention as well. To use *Paph. Sanderianum* as an example again, it is likely there are more individual plants of this species now available than ever before, due exclusively to the pressures from the horticultural market. This relatively new abundance of rare plant material can provide the necessary fuel for sound and practical reintroduction programs, as is currently being done with *Paphiopedilum rothschildianum*, as is currently being done with our native orchids.

It is indeed possible to minimize the negative impacts of collecting to a point where the benefits outweigh the detriments, primarily through trade in artificially propagated stock (other notable factors remain beyond the scope of this article). This has already been achieved with many different species; our native orchids should be not an exception.

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