

# Some Like It Hot

Our greenhouses and conservatories are stuffed with plants needing special care and attention. Yet many of us draw the line at orchids Michael Hughes finds out why no one should be afraid to have a go.

As a young man, David Barton was keen to challenge his new found horticultural skills. Yet for him, tending pots of geraniums and fuchsias didn't press any of the right buttons. Then he discovered orchids - and all the lights went shone.

"I did a course at Otley College to learn about turf care," explains David, who today is assistant course manager at Ipswich Golf Club.

"As we were taught all aspects of horticulture, I had to find an outlet for this newly acquired knowledge."

More than 25 years on and as a founding member and show secretary of the Suffolk Orchid Society, David is eager to share with others his excitement in growing orchids. There is no denying that orchids are among the most exotic of plants, with their show stopping flowers - like mini cascades of brightly-coloured humming-birds hovering over the handsome strappy leaves, or gaudily clad tropical spiders, too big and blousy to pounce.

Then there are the slipper orchids - quixotic footwear on wings.

Yet they are not the easiest of plants to grow and bring to flower. But David reckons that with a little help and advice from members of the society, many more people would happily take up the challenge

"Funnily enough, their natural inclination is to live. They are quite tough really, although people tend to cosset orchids and more are killed by kindness than anything else".

Now, most of us will think of orchids in terms of the rare and the unusual. However, advances in breeding techniques means that these days a wider variety of orchids than ever before can be mass-produced and are therefore more readily available, greatly reducing the cost.

"When I visited McBean's nursery, near Lewes, just after Charles and Diana were married in 1981, I saw the orchids that had

been used in Diana's wedding bouquet," recalls David.

"You could buy small plants of the same variety for £250. Now you'd pay £15 to £20, although prices of £50 and £60 are not uncommon."

If they are expensive, as pot plants go, then it's because of the four or five years it takes to nurture orchids to the point of flowering, he adds.

The days when you needed an extensive hothouse in which to grow orchids are passed, too.

David's collection of more than 200 plants are housed in a lean-to greenhouse, no more than 12ft long and 6ft wide, behind the modest end-of-terrace cottage off Woodbridge Road, Ipswich, that he shares with his wife and family.

Many of his plants are growing in small pots and not the huge earthenware containers that many of us might imagine.

"They grow happily in three or four inch pots, which means you can utilise the space to the maximum and make the most of the heating." He says. Certainly, heating is one of the biggest costs involved in growing orchids and while some like it hot all year round, others require only gentle heat for about six months of the year

"They also need plenty of moisture, as they come from jungle regions around the world. Yet over watering is the biggest cause of death."

When growing orchids in greenhouses or conservatories, or even on a windowsill, the aim is to recreate as near as possible the conditions under which they thrive in the wild. They need plenty of moisture and while David's greenhouse is a hot and humid place, spraying orchids a couple of times a day using a small hand water spray will usually do the trick.

While specialist growers no doubt have their own secret recipes, including added charcoal, crushed rock and bone meal, he reckons that fir bark chippings, of the sort used as a garden mulch, is as good a growing medium as any, giving good drainage and allowing lots of air to get to the roots.

"They also need a weekly feed of a balanced

fertiliser - Baby Bio is fine - at about a quarter of the strength you'd normally give house plants. More than that and it would be too strong for the sensitive root system."

Of all the orchid varieties available, David recommends three types as being the easiest for the home grower to care for.

The cymbidiums are perhaps the easiest of all, being cool-growing orchids that can be put outside in their pots during the summer, as they need bright filtered light and good ventilation.

The paphiopedilum types, better known as the slipper orchids, should be grown in a pot that restricts the roots. They need high humidity and bright filtered light in summer.

Cultivation of the phalaenopsis types is quite different, as in the wild these orchids grow in trees - and so must be grown on slabs of bark or in slatted baskets to allow the aerial roots to hang freely.

"They are not parasitic, like mistletoe, but more like air plants. They use the tree as support, taking that water that runs down the branches and feeding on nutrients from the jungle canopy, such as dead insects and bird droppings. They are easy to grow and bring to flower, although they do need heat \*18C065F) at night and in winter."

Then there are the dendrobium odotoglossum and zygopetalum - pronouncing their names is a challenge in itself.

Well, it all sounds very fiddily and complicated, David agrees. But he is anxious that no one should be put off without first giving themselves the chance to find out how to go about caring for orchids at home - and this is where the Suffolk Orchid Society comes in. Founded in 1981 and affiliated to the Orchid Society of Great Britain, the group now has about 40 members from across Suffolk and north Essex. It meets on the last Wednesday of every month (except December) at St Michaels Church Centre, Mendlesham. At the next meeting on Wednesday October 26, there will be a talk by well-known Surrey grower Janet Plested.

"The speakers usually bring orchids with them, which are for sale on the evening," says David. Other diary dates include the annual Christmas party on Wednesday November 30 at which

visitors are welcome. The club will be holding its annual show at Martlesham on Saturday March 25 2006 and also next year on Wednesday May 31 and Tuesday June 1, the society will be staging a display of orchids at the Suffolk Show.

"There may be someone who wants to know how to go about starting a collection or perhaps they have been given an orchid as a present and want to know how to look after it," says David. "If they come along to any of our meetings they will be made welcome and given all the help and advice they need."

This is an extract from the November 2005 edition of Lets Talk!



If you have any gardening queries or functions that you would like share with us and our readers, please get in touch with us by calling 01473 324712 or via email at [letters@letstalksuffolk.co.uk](mailto:letters@letstalksuffolk.co.uk)