

the orchid lifestyle

Passion bordering on mania means even vacations are planned around orchids for these two Atlanta collectors.

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

Ask Ron McHatton and Randy Young to show you around their greenhouse in midtown Atlanta and you'll soon find they speak their own language—a kind of pidgin derived from botanical Latin and what can only be called “Orchidese.” However, these two not only speak orchid, they live and breathe orchid as well. “Neither of us has any willpower,” McHatton confesses with a sweeping gesture meant to indicate the 2,000 orchids in their hand-built greenhouse. “These would all grow better with at least a third fewer plants in here.”

Like many orchid aficionados, McHatton and Young say their passion stems from the endless variety of the blooms. “There are 35,000 species and 40,000 hybrids,” McHatton explains. “You can collect a different one every day and never finish in your lifetime.” Both also savor the challenge of growing these finicky beauties (many orchids are

extremely sensitive to their environments and can tolerate temperature and humidity variations within only a very narrow range). “Success lies in mimicking conditions in the plant’s native environment,” says Young.

There are orchids native to every continent except Antarctica, though they’ve become rarer and even endangered in many places. In temperate regions like the U.S. and most of Europe, native orchids are terrestrial (ground-growing) and bear small flowers. It wasn’t until the early 1800s, when the showier epiphytes (tree-growing orchids) reached Europe from the tropics that the seeds of orchid-mania

were sown. Though the Victorians, with their love of the natural world, went mad for these exotic new orchids, most imported plants



Ron McHatton (left) and Randy Young grow 2,000 orchids in their greenhouse, including the hybrid *Cattleya* (above).



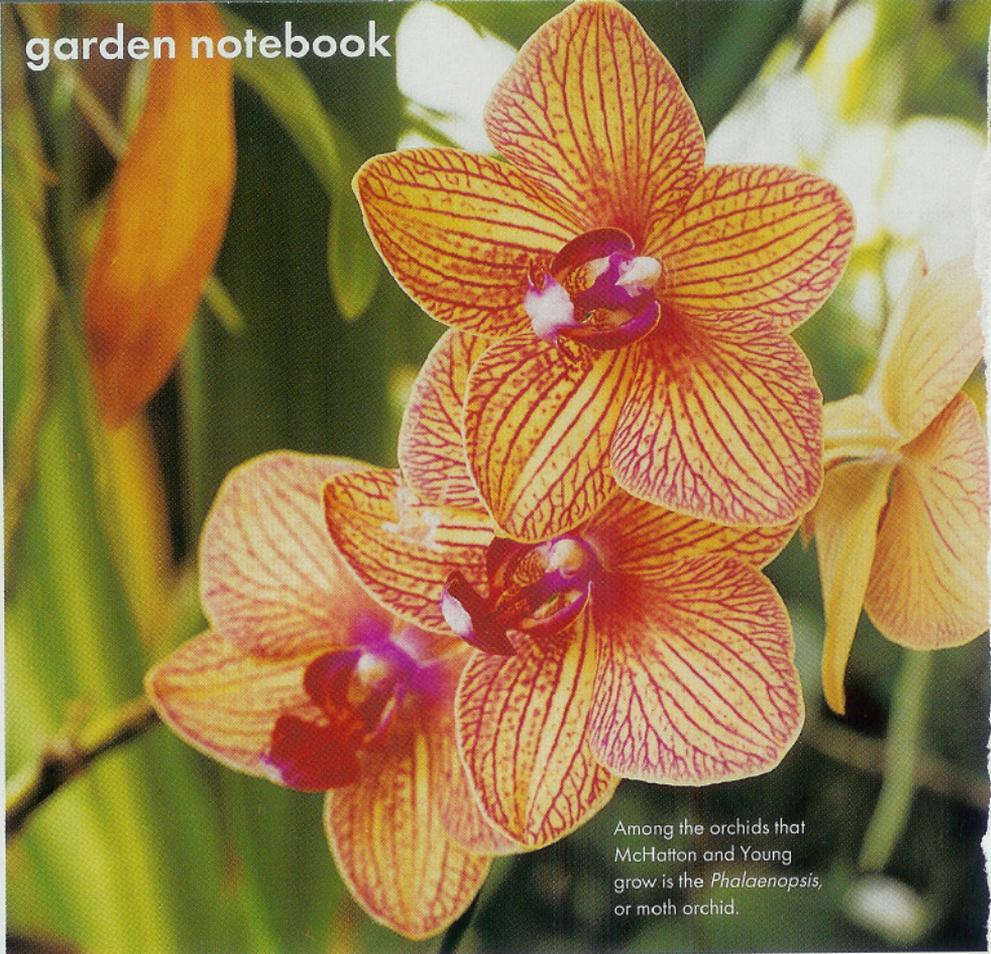
COMPLETE THE SURVEY ON THE ADJACENT PAGE TO WIN



Visit our showroom at 4084
Presidential Parkway,
Atlanta, GA 30340
or call (770) 458-2111
For other locations and
information visit our
Web site at
www.noland.com

Atlanta
MAGAZINE
HOME

garden notebook



Among the orchids that McHatton and Young grow is the *Phalaenopsis*, or moth orchid.

met a quick demise—there was simply no information available as to how to grow them. A spirit of keen competition quickly grew between 19th-century orchid hobbyists, who jealously guarded their secrets of success. It was a British botanist named William Cattley who built up the first collection of tropical orchids (the *Cattleya* genus of orchid is named for him). While the popularity of orchids has continued to grow, orchid gardeners make up a small portion of the gardening population, due to the challenge. According to Young, however, Southern gardeners may have an advantage. “In this climate, we can leave certain orchids outdoors for the long summers—then, the main challenge lies in over-wintering them successfully.”

In the case of McHatton and Young, each got hooked separately on orchids a long time ago. Young has grown orchids on and off for much of his adult life. McHatton bought his first orchid, a pink *Cattleya*, at age 8, after seeing a similar plant in a florist’s shop window, and he’s been growing them non-stop for nearly 40 years now. “It was the first time I’d seen an orchid as a plant, rather than a cut flower,” he remembers. “I thought,

‘Wow—you can grow these things!’ ”

When they met and combined their collections, individual passions united to create a crazed sort of zeal that completely took over their lives. They are both judges certified by the American Orchid Society, with enough experience to hand out blue ribbons to worthy growers. With this honor comes the responsibility of attending 12 to 20 orchid shows a year nationwide, mainly in spring and fall, and 12 monthly judgments in Atlanta. “There’s literally such a thing as an ‘orchid widow’,” says McHatton. “Like golf widows—if you’re not both doing the same thing, somebody will be left sitting at home. You’d be taking separate vacations.”

The men also work together on *Orchid Digest*, a non-profit magazine, where McHatton is president and Young is the advertising manager, and both are involved with the American Orchid Society (McHatton is a trustee and the chairperson of the research committee; Young sits on the affiliated societies committee). McHatton writes for *Orchids* magazine, and is working at refurbishing a greenhouse for the residents of Canterbury Court, a local

Degrees of Difficulty

Some orchids are definitely easier to grow than others. Here are five from Ron McHatton and Randy Young's greenhouse, from the least to most challenging.

TYPE	LIGHT	WATER	TEMPERATURE	HUMIDITY
<p><i>Phalaenopsis</i> (moth orchid)</p> 	Bright window where African violets flower well.	Keep moist—roots need air; grow in bark medium or African violet mix.	Need a 10 degree drop in night temperatures to induce flowering in winter.	Minimum 40-50%.
<p><i>Paphiopedilum</i> (lady slipper orchid)</p> 	Bright, diffused light. In summer can be outdoors in shade, or indoors in African violet conditions.	Keep moist—grow in African violet potting mix.	Some need cool nights to flower.	High—place outdoors in summer, then provide 50% during winter months indoors.
<p><i>Cattleya</i> ("corsage" orchid)</p> 	High—unobstructed, sunroom-type window or supplemental lighting. May burn with western exposure.	Must dry between waterings to prevent root rot.	Warm night temperatures.	Minimum 50%, with constant air flow.
<p><i>Dendrobium</i></p> 	Very high—greenhouse or outdoors.	Keep moist—don't allow to dry completely.	Very sensitive to temperature requirements. Minimum night temperature of 60 degrees for some, others 50 degrees or lower.	Very high. Place outdoors in summer.
<p><i>Ascocenda</i></p> 	Very high—greenhouse or outdoors.	Keep moist, but perfect drainage.	Warm.	High. Place outdoors in summer.

assisted-living facility. Sound like a hectic schedule? "We're busy all the time," confesses McHatton. "Our vacations are the judging events and trustees' meetings. And we always come back from judging shows with more orchids to find room for." In fact, the pair is considering the possibility of enlarging their available growing space by expanding their greenhouse back to the edge of their property.

Their current collection is broad, containing orchids native to every land mass in the world, from North American lady-tresses orchids to Asian varieties like *Cymbidium* and *Vanda*. The two have similar tastes, often opting for a stem lined with many diminutive flowers rather than large "corsage" types. "Lots of these would be considered ugly," admits McHatton.

"But to us they're amazingly beautiful in the complexity of these tiny flowers. We just can't get enough. We're collectors."

The thrill of collecting is just the tip of the iceberg. If you succeed at really drawing McHatton out about his near-obsessive love for orchids, he becomes pensive. "I think we pick our passions the same way we pick people," he says. "First, something catches our eye. Then it either holds our interest or it doesn't. I know for myself, I was raised in maritime northern California and it was never really warm there, so tropical things speak to me—like the warm, buoyant atmosphere you feel when you walk into the conservatory at the Atlanta Botanical Garden. People can be passionate about anything. It has to do with filling a void." ■