

In Love with Orchids

Neville Roberts examines the unique, romantic charm of a flower that is treasured all around the world...





A passion for orchids is not a new thing – thousands of years ago Confucius compared the pleasure of seeing good friends to entering a room full of fragrant orchids. Since then this beautiful flower has **made a special place for itself in many people's hearts, and has long been associated with love.** Chinese people call them lan, while the English name comes from ancient Greek.





The British started collecting them in the nineteenth century, and the first commercial orchids were grown in London in 1821. Man-made hybrids were produced by hobbyists soon after, then the Sun Kee Nursery in Singapore started selling them in 1913. These days harvesting them from the wild is banned in over 120 countries, because many of the 20,000 species are endangered. As a result, orchid collecting is now about growing plants in nurseries.





As well as their beauty, one reason why orchids are treasured is that they are delicate. Because their **seeds don't have significant reserves of nutrients, they are harder to produce than most flowers.** In the wild, germination depends on colonisation by mycorrhizal fungus, whereas in laboratories they are given a special agar jelly under sterile conditions. Today orchids are grown on assembly-line methods in extensive glasshouses with a controlled environment, but collectors like growing them at home.



The trick is to reproduce the orchid's native environment. Some orchids such as *Phalaenopsis* can be grown successfully on a windowsill, while Hardy Orchids can be grown in the garden or outside in pots in southern England. A lovely example is *Pleione tongariro*, which can be grown outdoors in a pot and brought indoors in April to enjoy the blooms. There are many orchids that are indigenous to the UK, such as some *Dactylorhiza*, *Anacamptis*, *Orchis*, *Listera* and *Platanthera*, but anyone growing the many varieties of tropical orchid needs a heated greenhouse.





One of the most beautiful places to see orchids is London's famous **Kew Gardens**, which has, among many other things, the magnificent Princess of Wales Conservatory that houses a superb collection of these lovely flowers. One tree there has been carefully populated with *Phalaenopsis* plants as they would occur in the wild, living off the nutrients from dead leaves that collect at the base of branches and from the surrounding air through their aerial roots. **Outside the capital city, there's also a splendid** Victorian orchid house on the Kingston Lacy estate in Bournemouth, Dorset, being rebuilt by the National Trust.

