

The Santa Barbara International

ORCHIDS ON THE AMERICAN RIVIERA®

BY HEIDI KIRKPATRICK

THE FAMED SANTA Barbara International Orchid Show turns 72 this year. As visitors step into the exuberant profusion of orchids in the golden-domed exhibit hall of the Earl Warren Showgrounds, they will find themselves immersed in one of the largest and oldest orchid shows in the country. The story of how a city of some 90,000 — almost 200,000 if one counts the neighboring communities — came to support one of the jewels of the orchid world is a story entwined with some of the biggest names in orchid growing.

Nestled along a narrow strip of south-facing coast in Southern California, the city of Santa Barbara is known as “The American Riviera®” for its mild, Mediterranean climate. Visitors may notice the red-tiled roofs of picturesque adobe houses climbing the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains or the cheerful masts of sailboats in the sheltered harbor, but it is the climate that delights local orchid growers and has led to a rich history of orchid horticulture.

Santa Barbara and its neighboring communities — Goleta, Montecito, Summerland, Carpinteria — owe their mild climate to the moderating influence of the Pacific Ocean. Summers are warm but not hot, with average temperatures in the 70s F (21–26 C). Winter lows rarely dip below freezing. Particularly important is the humidity, which rarely falls below 40% relative humidity along the coast. A marine layer often brings moisture-rich fog overnight, yielding to daytime sunshine.

This is marvelous weather for growing a number of orchid genera outdoors and they often can be found in gardens, potted in tubs or mounted on trees like ordinary garden plants. Even the Santa Barbara Zoo, ranked as one of the nation’s best small zoos and known for its exquisite coastal location, sports *Laelia anceps* mounted in the trees. But it is the genus *Cymbidium* that holds the historical spotlight of orchid agriculture in Santa Barbara and its neighboring communities.

At the beginning of the 1900s, railroad magnate Henry Huntington brought cymbidiums back from England and his head gardener planted them (in



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the ground!) with great success at what is today the Huntington Botanical Gardens in San Marino, some 100 miles (160 km) south of Santa Barbara. When the Santa Barbara area became popular with the wealthy looking to escape East Coast weather, many brought with them a keen interest in horticulture, and a number of the large Santa Barbara and Montecito estates followed Huntington’s lead to grow cymbidiums.

Cymbidiums were planted in raised beds on the Dickinson Estate, where Anna

- [1] Aerial view of Santa Barbara, often called the American Riviera®.
- [2] Wayne Ferrell, Santa Barbara Orchid Estate’s general manager and show president, with *Dendrobium speciosum* ‘Equinox’, CCE/AOS.
- [3] A display of lycastes and cymbidiums in the 2012 SBIOS.

Orchid Show

Dickinson grew and divided an enormous collection from plants imported from England. Elizabeth Chalifoux brought her plants from the Massachusetts collection of her father, Albert Burrage, a “Copper King” and also the first president of the American Orchid Society. Orchids were used as landscaping on the 87-acre (35.2-ha) estate of Stanley McCormick, where William Stribling was head gardener; his son Aleck would become co-owner of Gallup and Stribling Orchids (Stribling, pers. comm. 1984). Mrs. Carpentier grew her cymbidiums in a lath house, protected from dust and oak pollen by small canvas umbrellas; her culture paid off, producing a Grand Champion *Cymbidium* at the Santa Barbara Show in 1948. Eliot Rogers, considered a pioneer of orchid growing in Santa Barbara, was known to have particularly good contacts with McBean’s and other English orchid nurseries both prior to and after World War II. These contacts allowed him to amass at his estate what the great hybridizer Ernest Hetherington would call the era’s finest collection of cymbidiums in Santa Barbara, Southern California and perhaps the United States (Hetherington, pers. comm. 1984).

This was the age before mericlone made orchids widely available and the price of plants was high. But not all growers were wealthy. Joe Patarak worked as a grower for many of the large orchid collectors and nurseries, eventually opening his own nursery. Bob Peterson was a bread delivery truck driver when he received a cymbidium for his birthday. When it bloomed, he cut the flowers and sold them to a florist for a dollar each, which would have been about a half day’s wages. He and his brother built Peterson Brothers Nursery on the side while driving delivery trucks, and still managed to pay \$750 for a plant of *Cymbidium Alexanderi* ‘Westonbirt’ (Holden, pers. comm. 1984).

Many of the early growers imported their orchids or traded with each other, but the energetic Mary Bea Ireland was one of the early amateur orchid hybridizers. She lost her first husband, aviator Fred Noonan, on Amelia Earhart’s ill-fated flight in 1937, then married Harry



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B. Ireland and moved to Santa Barbara. Some of her most outstanding work was with miniature cymbidiums, such as *Cymbidium Fifi*, and her plants became part of the collection forming the business of Gary Gallup and Aleck Stribling (Gripp 1979).

It is not surprising that these early enthusiasts would want to share their successes at a venue more focused than a general flower show, and so the Orchid Show was born, but in those early days, it was the Santa Barbara Cymbidium

Show. The exhibitors in the earliest shows were primarily the wealthy estate owners of the Santa Barbara area, plus the venerable Armacost & Royston nursery of Los Angeles, the pioneer large commercial grower of Southern California. Many displays used cut spikes rather than potted blooming plants. There were no accredited judges, so judging of the displays and flowers was entirely by invitation.

Eliot Rogers managed several of the earliest shows, and perhaps it was his



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connections that brought cut-flower displays from McBean's in England. Admission was one dollar and John (Jack) Hudlow, founding member of the Cymbidium Society, performed as auctioneer at the first auction associated with the show. At the second auction in 1953, Fred A. Stewart paid \$2,600 for a three-pseudobulb plant of *Cymbidium* Rosanna 'Pinkie'. This much-sought-after stud plant came from the Rothschild collection in Exbury, England, and Stewart reportedly was delighted to tender the winning bid (McLean 1953).

During the 1950s, the show outgrew the recreation center where it had been held and moved to the National Guard Armory. In 1955, the American Orchid Society Trustees Meeting was held at the Santa Barbara International Cymbidium Show. Acknowledgement of growers who favored something other than cymbidiums was made with a "General Meeting of Orchidists" (Dillon 1955). In 1957, show organizers (Saurenman and Saurenman 1957) used the theme "Cymbidiums, Fifty Golden Years" to highlight the history of cymbidium hybridizing that began in England and continued in Santa Barbara County.

Commercial nurseries joined the estate owners as exhibitors at the show. The cut flower industry was growing in Santa Barbara and the neighboring communities, and the Santa Barbara Orchid Exchange enjoyed a brief existence as a cooperative way for growers to market the spikes and blooms. Show exhibitors of the 1950s included Armacost & Royston,



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Vallemar Gardens and Sherman Orchid Gardens. Herb Hager Orchids won trophies for cymbidiums before earning the recognition that would result in an American Orchid Society special annual award, the Herb Hager Award for the most outstanding phalaenopsis.

Like Armacost & Royston, Fred A. Stewart Orchids was not originally based in Santa Barbara County. But Fred Stewart purchased a home in Santa Barbara and built greenhouses where seedlings were grown up from the hybridizing done at the San Gabriel, California, facility a hundred miles (160 km) south of Santa Barbara. According to the venerable orchidist and

[4] Gallup & Stribling's 2015 cymbidium display.

[5] Orchids Royale's display of paphiopedilums in the 2012 show.

[6] James and Lauris Rose with the 2016 Cal-Orchid Best Display in the Show.

hybridizer Ernest Hetherington (pers. comm. 1984), long-time manager of Stewart Orchids, Fred Stewart was "the pioneer in the development of cymbidium cut flowers or the cut flower business in the Santa Barbara area." Stewart Orchids would become a fixture at the show for some 50 years.



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No discussion of orchid growing in the mid-20th century would be complete without inclusion of the Dos Pueblos Orchid Company and its owner, Samuel B. Mosher. The Signal Gas and Oil Company he founded was at one time the largest independent oil company on the West Coast and Mosher was the seventh richest man in the United States. In the 1940s, he purchased part of what had been the Rancho Dos Pueblos land grant a century earlier, a stretch of beachfront agricultural land west of Santa Barbara, then began a \$1,500,000 purchasing campaign to obtain the finest orchid collections from the greenhouses of Europe and the United States. In its heyday, Dos Pueblos had growing ranges in Goleta, California, as well as Hawaii and Australia and shipped some two million cut flowers a year. The nursery was also one of the first to work with chromosome counting and the large-scale hybridizing of orchids. Renowned cytologist and plant geneticist Dr. Gustav Mehlquist was a frequent guest of Mosher's, and much of cytogeneticist Dr. Donald Wimber's groundbreaking work with tissue culture and ploidy occurred at Dos Pueblos Orchid Company (Gripp and Thompson 2014).

In 1958, Jack Hudlow was show manager and "changed the whole thing

around." With the help of the landscape architect from the University of California at Santa Barbara — "in those days one building and a bunch of Quonset huts" — Jack went to Montecito to pick oak trees to line the inside of the show venue at the National Guard Armory. The county was responsible for the layout and used prisoners as laborers, paying each a carton of cigarettes. It was the first year the show featured sales booths, located in a tent outside and including not only orchid sales but a restaurant and a booth that sold glass cleaner. An Orchid Queen was crowned, a 45-man chorus sang and an ice review featured top stars of the skating world giving nine performances during the show (Hudlow and Day 1984). The Grand Champion Cymbidium was awarded to *Cymbidium* Jungfrau 'Dos Pueblos' AM/AOS, AM/Royal Horticultural Society, S/Cymbidium Society of America (CSA) from Dos Pueblos Orchid Company.

The following year, the show officially changed its name to the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show to reflect "the broadening range of orchids being grown in the Santa Barbara area." Cymbidiums still dominated the exhibits, but there were 10 new judging sections, including "cattleyas, cyripediums, phalaenopsis, vandas, dendrobiums and botanicals"

(Dillon 1959). The Fred A. Stewart Company won the Grand Champion Cymbidium trophy with *Cymbidium* Lillian Stewart 'Lyric' AM/AOS, B/CSA, but there were also trophies for Best Cattleya (to Armacost & Royston for *Cattleya* Wyatt Earp), for Best Phalaenopsis (to Vallemar Gardens for *Phalaenopsis* Vallemar 'Santa Barbara'), and for other genera. Exhibitors came not only from California, but also from Hawaii and Japan. The American Orchid Society Trophy for Most Outstanding Orchid Exhibit was awarded to a relative newcomer at the time, Robert J. Chrisman's Santa Barbara Orchid Estate (Dillon 1959, Beavers 1959). Almost 60 years later, the Santa Barbara Orchid Estate is still one of the major exhibitors at the show; their *Dendrobium speciosum* 'Equinox' was the 2016 Best Orchid in Show, the latest in a long list of outdoor growing orchids, usually specimen-sized species that have received top honors from the judges.

The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show came of age in the 1960s, moving to its current venue at Earl Warren Showgrounds. The orchid nurseries of the era are reflected in the winners of the Grand Champion Cymbidium Trophies, the AOS Show Trophies and the Best Orchid in Show: Dos Pueblos

Orchid Company, Braemar Orchids, Fred A. Stewart Company, Cobb's Orchids, Peterson Brothers, Santa Barbara Orchid Estate. When the 5th World Orchid Conference was held in Long Beach in 1966, Santa Barbara area nurseries were well represented.

The character of the show changed again in 1976, when Ernest Hetherington founded the Annual Cymbidium Congress of the Cymbidium Society of America to be held in conjunction with the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show. Orchid shows have always been venues for growers to connect with each other, but Hetherington's creation of a lecture series associated with the show gave serious growers a day to share their knowledge with each other. Hetherington acted as congress chair for 10 years, cementing the event as part of the orchid show weekend. In its 41 years, the congress has brought speakers and attendees from across the country and around the world, including from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Southeast Asia, South Africa, China and Europe (Kirkpatrick 2015).

The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show of the 70s and 80s reflected the changing landscape of orchid growing in Santa Barbara County. Orchids as landscaping on grand estates yielded to orchids as profitable commercial enterprise, none more so than Gallup & Stribling Orchid Nursery in Carpinteria. From 1974 through 1993, 17 of the 20 Grand Champion Cymbidiums came from Gallup & Stribling. During an interview arranged by the show in 1984, Gary Gallup noted that the nucleus of the Gallup & Stribling operation came originally from five seed capsules from Eliot Rogers, orchids from Mary Bea Ireland and the entire collection from Elizabeth Chalifoux. Plants such as *Cymbidium* Via Ambarino 'Gold Nugget' S/CSA with its 6-inch (15-cm) flowers earned top honors at the show, and Gallup & Stribling became known for their lavish displays, particularly the 1990 display featuring as a prop a 1927 Mercedes Benz 630K in mint condition (Anonymous 1990).

The 40th Santa Barbara International Orchid Show, in 1985, with current Show Director John Rowe at the helm as president, was known as the "West Coast Show of the Decade" (Phillips 1985). It was the 60th anniversary of the American Orchid Society and the 10th Cymbidium Congress, and the American Orchid Society elected to hold the spring Trustees Meeting in Santa Barbara at



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the show. James and Lauris Rose, now of Cal-Orchid, convinced the owners of what had been the Dickinson Estate to open their property for a gala preview party and banquet that featured quartets and Spanish dancers. Exhibitors included some of the grand old nurseries, plus newer growers with names that are still familiar today, such as Paphanatics UnLtd or Orchids Royale from Carpinteria. In addition, the rising popularity of orchid societies translated to participation by several that are still part of the show today, including the Orchid Society of Santa Barbara and Malibu Orchid Society.

Individual hobby growers came to prominence alongside the commercial nurseries in the shows of the 1990s. The late S. Robert Weltz of Montecito exhibited at the show for a number of years. In 1990, his paphiopedilums earned seven AOS awards, seven CSA awards, and four show trophies, including the *Orchid Digest* trophy (Anonymous 1990). In 1991, Weltz created a sensation at the show with the richly colored *Paphiopedilum* Kevin Porter 'Wizard Weltz', which received a gold medal from the CSA and an AM from the AOS (Anonymous 1992). Weltz, a transplanted New York stockbroker who began collecting orchids in his Park Avenue apartment, amassed a superb paphiopedilum collection that was donated to the Huntington Botanical Gardens upon his death.

The 1998 Best Orchid in Show was one of the largest cultivated specimens of *Dendrobium speciosum* in the world, grown by another Santa Barbara amateur grower, retired anthropology professor Don Brown. *Dendrobium speciosum* var. *hillii* was a monster some 9 feet (2 ¾ m) in diameter weighing around 1,000 pounds (455 kg), much more than Brown could transport, so he sold the plant to Paul Gripp, past owner of the Santa Barbara Orchid Estate, who gave the plant the cultivar name 'Don Brown'. Judges at the show were amazed at the display, awarding the Best Orchid in Show trophy to exhibitor Paul Gripp and a 99-point AOS Certificate of Cultural Merit (now a Certificate of Cultural Excellence [CCE]) to Don Brown, who had grown the plant since the early 1970s (Kirkpatrick 1998). Brown still exhibits at the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show and is known for his superlative culture. The plant featured on the 2017 show poster is Brown's *Mystacidium capense* 'Carrie Chu', which received a CCE and an FCC at the same judging and was awarded the Ann and Phil Jesup Award for outstanding



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orchid species and the Fred Hillerman Award for most outstanding example of the angraecoid alliance. In 2016, the United Nations used the image as part of a stamp set commemorating conservation (Brown 2016).

Paul Gripp also still exhibits at the show and is the consummate orchid man, calling himself "a student of orchids" and entertaining orchid lovers with marvelous stories of the orchid world (Gripp pers. comm. 1984, 2016). He began as the grower for insurance magnate R. J. Chrisman at the Santa Barbara Orchid Estate and bought the nursery in 1967. During the course of his orchid career, Gripp traveled the world in search of

- [7] Carrie Chu and Don Brown in 1998 with *Dendrobium speciosum* var. *hillii* 'Don Brown', CCE/AOS (99pts). This little nearly 10 foot [3 m] wide jewel had more than 100,000 flowers.
- [8] *Mystacidium capense* 'Carrie Chu', FCC-CCE/AOS expertly grown by Don Brown.
- [9] Santa Barbara Orchid Estate is known for its *Laelia anceps*. This display from the 2016 show contains just a few varieties.
- [10] Left to right: Michael Sinn (Canaima Orchids), George Hatfield (Hatfield Orchids), James Rose (Cal-Orchid) and Munekazu Ejiri (Suwada Orchids, Japan) on setup day in 2013.
- [11] Paul Gripp with a display of *Cymbidium lowianum* in 2010.

orchids and shared his knowledge as a lecturer and writer. The nursery now belongs to his children, though Gripp still can be found among the plants. His love of history is reflected in the exhibits he installs at the show under the name Santa Barbara Orchid Garden and Library. His 2016 display commemorated the travels

of the 19th-century orchid explorer Sir Joseph Hooker, featuring species Hooker encountered and including an edition of Hooker's *Himalayan Journals*.

The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show of the 21st century has been characterized by a mix of smaller, individual exhibits and large, awe-inspiring displays. In 2005, Montecito residents Sandra and Al Svoboda exhibited 55 complex paphiopedilums of award or near-award quality (Velardi and Velardi 2005). In 2006, Sandra Svoboda took the reins for several years as long-time show manager Frank Cobb retired. She has gone on to serve as editor-in-chief of the *Orchid Digest*, president of the World Orchid Conference and president of the American Orchid Society. Current AOS president George Hatfield is the immediate past president of the show. His nursery, Hatfield Orchids, continues the tradition of cymbidium displays at the show and has exhibited five of the Grand Champion Cymbidiums since 2006, including *Cymbidium* Doris Hirata 'Superstar' HCC/AOS, S/CSA, in 2015.

New technologies have appeared in the recent displays of Dr. Daniel Geiger, curator of malacology (mollusks) at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. His expertise with electron microscopy has given show visitors a unique view of the genus *Oberonia*, which has been the subject of his educational displays for the show. In addition to aiding the AOS Species Identification Task Force as the *Oberonia* expert, Geiger has researched the genus with various international institutions, including Kew, Leiden/Naturalis, the Smithsonian and the Australian National Herbarium in Canberra.

The intimate individual displays reward patient, close-up viewing, but it is the large exhibits that define the immediate experience of most show visitors. The Sweepstakes "Best Display in Show" trophy has been awarded in the past few years to one of two exhibitors: Ventura Farms and Cal-Orchid. The noncommercial Ventura Farms has for several years installed crowd-pleasing displays with orchids festooning showy props, including waterfalls, ponds and meandering paths. In 2011, the Ventura Farms display included not one but two vintage automobiles: a Hudson truck and a Cadillac convertible. Last year's Asian-themed display featured a pavilion, an obelisk and a keyhole gate.

Cal-Orchid is the nursery of James and Lauris Rose, recently recognized by the AOS with an Outstanding Hybridizer Award for their reedstem epidendrum



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breeding program. The Roses began with orchids at Santa Barbara Orchid Estate but eventually purchased what was then Orchids by Rowe, a 2-acre (0.8-ha) cymbidium cut-flower range two blocks from the ocean. The variety of orchids available at their nursery is reflected in their displays at the show. Their winning 2016 display featured a vintage Ford truck, an adobe façade and a colorful profusion of orchids from lycastes to cymbidiums.

As the 2017 Santa Barbara International Orchid Show approaches —

[12] The 2016 Westerlay Orchids *Cymbidium* display.

[13] A bird's-eye view of the 2016 show taken by drone the night before judging.

[14] Ventura Farms took the AOS Show Trophy, Orchid Digest Show Trophy and the Design of Distinction trophy in 2016 with this breathtakingly executed display.



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March 17 through 19 — yet another part of the story of orchids in Santa Barbara County will be written. The exhibit hall will fill once again with the fragrance and colors of displays large and small, foreign and domestic, commercial and amateur. The juried orchid art show will return, as will the floral arrangements and corsages; the curious and committed will learn more about orchids from demonstrations, the Master Gardeners, or the lecturers at the 42nd Annual Cymbidium Congress. As they leave the show through the sales area, show visitors might just bring home that special plant that fires their interest in orchids and engages them in this hobby that the rest of us already know and love.

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winning *Dendrobium speciosum* var. *hillii* 'Don Brown'. The 2017 Santa Barbara International Orchid Show will be held March 17 through 19, with a gala preview party March 16. This year's theme is "Orchid Mystique." Learn more about the Show at www.sborchidshow.com and about Santa Barbara at santabarbaraca.com.