



THE EXHIBITS were installed. The judges were beginning to gather. And then came the news everyone had dreaded: The COVID pandemic had reached California, and the governor was limiting gatherings to two hundred fifty people. The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show (SBIOS) had to close the day before it was slated to open to the public.

It was March 2020, and the show was ready to celebrate its 75th year of sharing orchids with an orchid-loving public. And what a glorious 75 years!

The story of the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show is one of orchid personalities, orchid nurseries, and a fortuitous climate. With the mild-Mediterranean climate of a southern-facing southern California coast-

line, Santa Barbara is ideal for growing many orchid genera outdoors. Summer highs average in the 70s, winter lows rarely dip below freezing, and a marine layer frequently draws morning fog from the Pacific Ocean to kiss the base of the mountains with humidity.

Orchids have been grown in southern California since the beginning of the 1900s when railroad magnate Henry Huntington brought cymbidiums from England to his San Marino estate, where his head gardener planted them (in the ground!) with great success. Wealthy estate owners in Montecito and Santa Barbara took note. Many of them had escaped East Coast weather and brought with them an enthusiasm for horticulture.



Cymbidium Fifi AM/AOS



Cymbidium Jungfrau 'Dos Pueblos' AM/AOS



Cymbidium Lillian Stewart AM/AOS

These early 20th-century orchid growers imported their collections from the nurseries of Europe. One of the pioneers of orchid growing in Santa Barbara was Eliot Rogers. He had excellent contacts with McBean's and other British orchid houses both before and after World War II. The great hybridizer Ernest Hetherington considered Roger's cymbidium collection the era's finest in southern California and perhaps even the United States.

Enthusiasts in Santa Barbara County amassed other grand collections. Anna Dickinson also imported plants from British nurseries and successfully grew cymbidiums in raised garden beds. One of the early Grand Champion Cymbidiums at the Santa Barbara Show was grown by Mrs. Carpentier. Her cymbidiums were shaded in a lath house and protected from dust and oak pollen by small canvas umbrellas. Elizabeth Chalifoux brought her orchids with her from Massachusetts. They came from the collection of her father, Albert Burrage, the first president of the American Orchid Society.

Orchids landscaped the 87-acre McCormick estate in Montecito, known as Riven Rock. The McCormick's head gardener was William Stribling, whose son, Aleck, would become co-owner of Gallup and Stribling Orchids. The Riven Rock estate was eventually divided into smaller estates, one of which is the current residence of Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.

Mary Bea Ireland was a notable amateur orchid hybridizer in the Santa Barbara orchid world. She had married Harry B. Ireland and moved to Santa Barbara after the 1937 death of her first husband, Fred Noonan. He was Amelia Earhart's navigator on her ill-fated attempt to become the first woman pilot to circumnavigate the world. The formidable Mary Bea Ireland was known mainly for her work in breeding miniature cymbidiums, such as *Cymbidium Fifi* (*madidum* × *Argonaut*). The cymbidiums from her collection were an integral part of forming the nursery of Gallup and Stribling.

There were flower shows in Santa Barbara, but the local orchid growers eventually established their own event to showcase their flowers. The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show came into existence as the Santa Barbara Cymbidium Show, reflecting the over-



Santa Barbara Orchid Estate



Santa Barbara Orchid Estate, Design of Distinction display, 2018.



Santa Barbara Orchid Estate, Best in Show: *Dendrobium teretifolium* 'Santa Barbara'.



Gallup and Stribling retail store and visitor center.

whelming popularity of cymbidiums in southern California. Many displays used cut spikes, understandable in an era when it was not uncommon to grow orchids in large beds. Even into the 1950s, growers such as El Rancho Rinconada and Dos Pueblos Orchid Nursery grew their cymbidiums in raised beds with amended soil. To bring a whole plant, a grower would have to dig it up.

In addition to the local estate owners, exhibitors included nurseries such as the venerable Armacost & Royston nursery of Los Angeles, a pioneer large commercial grower of southern California. Several of these early shows were managed by Eliot Rogers, who arranged cut-flower displays from McBean's in England. The shows were judged, but judges were initially untrained and chosen by invitation. The newly formed Cymbidium Society began judging plants in 1948, and the list of Grand Champion Cymbidiums from the show reads as a survey of cymbidium hybridizing over the decades.



Best in Show, 1998: *Dendrobium speciosum* var. *hillii* 'Don Brown' with Carrie and Don Brown.

Admission to the show in those early days was one dollar, and visitors enjoyed displays and exhibits but no orchid sales. Nevertheless, orchid enthusiasts were willing to spend a great deal on prized plants. John (Jack) Hudlow, a founding member of the Cymbidium Society, was the auctioneer at the first auction associated with the show. The second auction in 1953 included a much sought-after stud plant of *Cymbidium* Rosanna 'Pinkie' (Rosanna x Lucky Kawano) from the Rothschild collection in Exbury, England. The winning bid for a three-bulb plant was \$2,600, paid by Fred A. Stewart, who was reportedly delighted.

By the time the American Orchid Society Trustees came to Santa Barbara in 1955, the show had added "International" to its name and a description as a "General Meeting of Orchidists" (AOS Bull. 1955). More commercial nurseries exhibited at the show as the cut flower industry thrived in Santa Barbara County. Exhibitors were a who's who of southern California orchid nurs-



Gallup and Stribling, Best Theme of Show Display, 2008.

eries: Armacost & Royston; Vallemar Gardens; Sherman Orchid Gardens; Herb Hager Orchids. Today, the name is familiar as part of the Herb Hager Phalaenopsis Award presented annually by the American Orchid Society. However, in the 1950s, Herb Hager's cymbidiums were winning trophies in Santa Barbara.

Fred A. Stewart Orchids made its debut as Grand Champion Cymbidium winner in 1959. Though not originally from Santa Barbara, Fred Stewart bought a home and built greenhouses in the county. There he grew seedlings to maturity from the hybridizing at Stewart's San Gabriel facility, a hundred miles to the south. Ernest Hetherington, who managed Stewart Orchids for many years, considered Fred Stewart "the pioneer in the development of cymbidium cut flowers and the cut flower business in the Santa Barbara area."



Orchids Royale, CSA Gold Medal Paphiopedilum Display.



Santa Barbara Orchid Garden and Library (Paul Gripp) display.



Hatfield Orchids display.



Grand Champion of show in 2012:
Cymbidium Oxnard Dots 'Hatfields' HCC/AOS

But the show of the mid-20th century was dominated by the Dos Pueblos Orchid Company, owned by Samuel B. Mosher, at one point the seventh richest man in the United States. He founded Signal Gas and Oil, the largest independent oil company on the West Coast, and used some of his profits to purchase beachfront agricultural land west of Santa Barbara. Then he went on a \$1.5M shopping spree through the orchid collections in Europe. With growing ranges in Hawaii and Australia in addition to California, Dos Pueblos eventually shipped some two million cut flowers a year. Mosher also invested in scientific development, and his nursery pioneered work with chromosome counting and large-scale hybridizing of orchids. Frequent guests included the cytologist and plant geneticist Dr. Gustav Mehlquist. Dr. Donald Wimber's ground-breaking work with tissue culture and ploidy began in the labs at Dos Pueblos.

In 1958, show manager Jack Hudlow introduced a sense of spectacle to the show, then held at the National Guard Armory. He enlisted a landscape architect from the University of California at Santa Barbara and picked oak trees from Montecito for the inside of the venue. Labor was provided by Santa Barbara County in the form of prisoners, each of whom earned a carton of cigarettes. An Orchid Queen was crowned, a forty-five-man chorus sang, and top stars of the skating world gave nine ice skating performances during the show. Dos Pueblos Orchid Company won Grand Champion Cymbidium with *Cymbidium* Jungfrau 'Dos Pueblos' AM/AOS, AM/RHS, S/CSA (Alexanderi × Eagle). Perhaps most notably from the perspective of general show attendees, this was the first year of orchid sales at the show.

Given "the broadening range of orchids being grown in the Santa Barbara area," the next Show became the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show, with ten new judging sections, including "Cattleyas, Cypripediums, Phalaenopsis, Vandas, Dendrobium and botanicals" (AOS Bull. 1959) In addition to the Grand Champion Cymbidium, Fred A. Stewart Company's *Cymbidium* Lillian Stewart 'Lyric' AM/AOS, B/CSA (Balkis × Carisone), Best Cattleya went to Armacost & Royston for C. Wyatt Earp (Paradisio × Prospector) and Best Phalaenopsis was awarded to Vallemar Gardens for *Phal.* Vallemar 'Santa Barbara' AM/AOS (Grace Palm × Atlanta). Exhibitors came from Hawaii and Japan, but the American Orchid Society's Most Outstanding Orchid Exhibit was awarded to newcomer Santa Barbara Orchid Estate. Then owned by Robert J. Chrisman, Santa Barbara Orchid Estate would become a fixture at the show for over sixty years. In 2018, the Orchid Estate won Best Orchid in Show with an enormous specimen plant of *Dendrobium teretifolium* 'Santa Barbara'.

The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show moved to its current venue in the 1960s. Santa Barbara locals claim the golden-domed, star-shaped exhibit pavilion of Earl Warren Showgrounds was designed partly to reflect the Orchid Show and the Home and Garden Show. Grand Champion Cymbidium and Best in Show winners were grown by a number of area nurseries: Braemar Orchids, Cobb's Orchids, Dos Pueblos Orchid Company, Santa Barbara Orchid Estate, Universal Orchids. The Peterson Brothers earned returns on their investment with two Grand Champion Cymbidiums in back-to-back years. In a clever marketing move, Dos Pueblos already had meristems available for sale when their plant of *Cymbidium* San Francisco 'Dos Pueblos



Ventura Farms, Sweepstakes - Best Display in Show, 2011.

Special' AM/AOS (Blue Smoke × Balkis) received top honors in 1967. Universal Orchids presented *Cymbidium* Lagoon 'Braemar' FCC/AOS (Balkis × Miretta), the only cymbidium to receive the highest awards from the American Orchid Society, the Cymbidium Society of America, and the Royal Horticultural Society.

The grand estates with orchids as landscaping yielded to commercial orchid nurseries in the 1970s and 1980s. This was the era of Gallup & Stribling, which won seventeen of twenty Grand Champion Cymbidium Trophies between 1974 and 1993. According to Gary Gallup, interviewed at the show in 1984, the breeding program rose from orchids from Mary Bea Ireland, five seed pods from Eliot Rogers, and Elizabeth Chalifoux's entire collection. In addition to their large-flowered cymbidiums, such as the six-inch *Cymbidium* Via Ambarino 'Gold Nugget' S/CSA (Via Cox × Thanksgiving), Gallup & Stribling installed elaborate displays. The 1990 exhibit was styled with orchids surrounding a pristine 1927 Mercedes Benz 630K (*Orchid Advocate* 1990).

In 1985, the 40th Santa Barbara International Orchid Show coincided with the 10th Cymbidium Congress and the American Orchid Society's 60th anniversary. The AOS Trustees chose Santa Barbara as their venue, and show president John Rowe oversaw what was

known as the "West Coast Show of the decade." (Phillips, 1985). Exhibitors from grand old nurseries were featured alongside newer growers such as Paphanatics UnLtd, and nearby Carpinteria's Orchids Royale. Amateur growers formed orchid societies that exhibited at the show, including the Orchid Society of Santa Barbara and Malibu Orchid Society, which are still participants in 2020. Trustees enjoyed a gala preview party and banquet with live music and Spanish dancers.

Exceptional hobby orchid growers began to exhibit at the show during the 1990s. Of particular note was the late S. Robert Weltz of Montecito, a transplanted New York stockbroker who began his exceptional collection of paphiopedilums in his Park Avenue apartment. Weltz, who once was interviewed by Leslie Stahl on *60 Minutes* as "the consummate orchid grower," installed a superb display in 1990 that earned seven AOS awards, seven CSA awards, and four show trophies, including the Orchid Digest trophy. The following year, the judges rewarded his richly colored Paphiopedilum Kevin Porter 'Wizard Weltz' (bellatulum × micranthum) with a CSA Gold medal and an Award of Merit from the AOS. After his death in 2010, his orchid collection was donated to the Huntington Botanical Gardens. Under the direction of Brandon Tam, the collection has grown and thrived, and the Huntington has continued to ex-



Ventura Farms, 2016.



Ventura Farms, Sweepstakes - Best Display in Show, 2013.



Ventura Farms, Best Display, any size, non-commercial, 2018.

hibit at the show. The Huntington's signature tiered, cakelike structure forms ledges the perfect size and height to display slipper orchids near eye level.

Another remarkable plant won Best Orchid in Show in 1998. The *Dendrobium speciosum* var. *hillii* was some nine feet in diameter and weighed in the vicinity of a thousand pounds, one of the largest cultivated specimens of its type in the world. Retired anthropology professor Don Brown had grown it since the early 70s, and it had thrived in the Santa Barbara climate. The behemoth was more than he could transport, so before the show, he sold it to Paul Gripp, past owner of the Santa Barbara Orchid Estate. With the help of an Orchid Estate crew, Gripp managed to wrestle the plant into its own display at the show, where he gave it the cultivar name 'Don Brown'. Judges presented the Best Orchid in Show trophy to exhibitor Paul Gripp and a 99-point AOS Certificate of Cultural Excellence to Don Brown.

The consummate orchid man, Paul Gripp, has participated in the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show since he began as a grower for insurance magnate R. J. Chrisman at the Santa Barbara Orchid Estate. Gripp bought the nursery in 1967, which now belongs to his children, though he can still be found amongst the orchids. As a "student of orchids," Gripp has traveled the world to experience them in situ and to share his knowledge as a lecturer and writer. As the Santa Barbara Orchid Garden and Library, Gripp has shared his love of orchid history and historical orchids via displays. In 2010, he celebrated Mary Bea Ireland with a display of her hybrids and her original cross book. In 2015, he celebrated women botanical artists, including the notable Miss Nelly Roberts.

In the 21st century, the show combines charming smaller exhibits and large, lavish displays. Montecito residents Sandra and Al Svoboda's 2005 exhibit fea-

tured 55 paphiopedilums of award or near-award quality, primarily the complex hybrids that were Al Svoboda's passion. The following year, Sandra Svoboda became show manager when Frank Cobb retired. She would go on to serve as president of the American Orchid Society and the World Orchid Conference—and, of course, editor-in-chief of the *Orchid Digest*.

For much of the 21st century, Andy's Orchids from Encinitas, California, has exhibited a crowd-pleasing display of intricately-arranged miniature orchids, predominantly the unusual species for which the nursery is well-known. His detailed exhibits, centered around a large Wardian case, frequently have found favor with the judges to receive the Harry B Ireland trophy for best display in *his* class.

Hatfield Orchids continues the tradition of the cymbidium shows of yesteryear, earning multiple Grand Champion Cymbidium (Samuel B. Mosher) trophies and numerous flower quality awards. Hatfield's displays always feature the cymbidiums, first and foremost. In 2012, his innovative solution to exhibiting his pendulous cymbidiums included large PVC pipes painted flat black that formed sleeves to hold the cymbidium pots suspended above the standard *Cymbidium* hybrids. That year, *Cymbidium* Oxnard Dots (Cham-pagne Robin × *devonianum*) 'Hatfield's' received the Grand Champion Cymbidium trophy and an HCC/AOS flower quality award. Highlighting the fine qualities of his cymbidiums, he also received the Reserve Grand Champion Cymbidium trophy for *Cymbidium* James Toya 'Hueneme'.

First impressions of the show are heavily influenced by the large exhibits that leave visitors marveling. For a stretch of almost ten years, the Orchid Digest Trophy was dominated by the displays of Ventura Farms, the horse farm and orchid conservatory of Dole Food Com-



The Huntington Botanical Gardens,
CSA Gold Medal Paphiopedilum Display, 2018.

pany chairman David Murdock. It was a return to the days of grand estate orchid collections, and Ventura Farms always installed showy, crowd-pleasing exhibits of oversized structures festooned with orchids. The 2011 exhibit featured not one but two vintage automobiles: a Hudson truck and a Cadillac convertible. The 2016 exhibit was an Asian-themed garden complete with a pavilion, an obelisk, and a keyhole gate.

Vying for Best Display has been Cal-Orchid, the nursery of James and Lauris Rose. The Roses began with orchids at Santa Barbara Orchid Estate but eventually purchased the nearby Orchids by Rowe. The variety of orchids grown at their nursery is reflected in the colorful swaths of orchids in their displays. However, it



Andy's Orchids display, 2018.

is their reedstem epidendrum hybrids that shine, earning them a lifetime achievement award from the AOS. Their playful designs often include interesting props, such as the vintage Ford truck in 2016 or the metal dinosaur sculptures prancing through cymbidiums in 2018.

Westerlay Orchids has installed intricately themed displays festooned with their signature phalaenopsis in the last few shows. In 2018, Dorothy's house faced a colorful tornado of pink phalaenopsis flowers. The Cinderella-themed 2019 exhibit featured a slipper, a dress composed of orchid flowers, and a popular orchid-decorated coach that visitors could sit in. Perhaps their most exciting display was in the 2020 show, their



Cal Orchid, Sweepstakes - Best Display in Show, 2018.

"Enchanted Tiki Room," featuring a pond with a waterfall, colorful bird and tiki sculptures, and vibrantly colored orchids.

There were other exceptional displays in that unseen show of 2020. Newcomer Joe Ambriz of Ambriz Kingdom of Plants in Carpinteria installed an arbor in a garden of *Laelia anceps*. At the forefront of the display rested a division of *Dendrobium speciosum* var. *hillii* 'Don Brown'. It would need another decade or two of growth to match the size of the 1998 behemoth, but this specimen was large enough to require a dolly and three people for installation. There were more plants of *Dendrobium speciosum* in the Santa Barbara Orchid Estate

display, along with lemon-yellow cattleyas and several hanging botanicals, grown to the Orchid Estate's signature specimen size. Zuma Orchids, newly renamed after George Vasquez retired, presented elegant baskets of arching phalaenopsis. Orchids Royale, with their several decades of award-winning paphiopedilums, cymbidiums, and lycastes, always installs elegant displays, and 2020 was no different. The slipper orchids were featured in wood-framed planters, lycastes hung in splashes of color against the wall, and cymbidiums framed the edges.

Orchid societies have been a strong presence at the show of the 21st century, a trend that continued at the



Westerly Orchids, Most Artistic Display in Show, 2018



Westerlay Orchids, Design of Distinction and Most Artistic Display, 2019

2020 Show. The Orchid Society of Santa Barbara featured a lush garden in miniature, complete with a colorfully lit miniature waterfall. The Vietnamese Orchid Society, a relative newcomer to the show, returned for a second outing in a beautifully naturalistic display of well-grown cymbidiums and other orchids twined amongst driftwood. Conejo Orchid Society acknowledged the 2020 theme, “Orchid Adventure,” with a tent pitched along a path through an orchid-strewn wilderness. The Five Cities Orchid Society featured a khaki-clad mannequin poised to climb a cliff in a lush orchid habitat. The San Fernando Valley Orchid Society displayed their members’ orchids against a garden fence, with whimsical sun sculptures, a snarling crocodile, and a bright yellow frog climbing a rocky waterfall.

It was a beautiful show, the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show’s 75th, and it went unseen by the orchid-loving public. When the pandemic had calmed enough for the Board to entertain planning another show, there was a lively discussion about numbering. Was it really the 75th Show if no one got to see it?

As the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show returns March 10 through 12 of 2023, it will be planning its 75th Show...again. Only this time, the show will be shared with everyone!

Information about the upcoming Santa Barbara International Orchid Show can be found online at sborchidshow.com. The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show is a 501(c)3 organization. With COVID and the resulting cancellation of shows, SBIOS could use your help and your donation to help this incredible show continue.✿

About the Author



Heidi Kirkpatrick has grown orchids since falling madly in lust with a paphiopedilum at Rod McClellan’s in the early 1990s. While slipper orchids are her first love, her collection is dominated by cymbidiums and *Laelia anceps*, both of which grow exceptionally well outdoors in Santa Barbara. She has

written for *Orchids*, the *Orchid Digest*, and served as editor for the *CSA Journal*. Heidi became involved with the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show in 2005 when a pre-*Orchid Digest* Sandra Svoboda strong-armed her into helping with plant registration for judging.

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GALLERY: Santa Barbara 2020: the Show that never was.



Entrance to the show.



Conejo Orchid Society display.



Santa Barbara Orchid Estate display.



Westerlay Orchids display.



Zuma Orchids display.



Ambriz Kingdom of Plants display.