

Chatting with Graham Markcrow

I am a small grower, my main interest is standard Cattleyas. I was always disappointed that I never had enough flowers in the shed. A friend of mine said "That's easily remedied get your self some hard-cane Dendrobiums". So I got a few, they went alright but were not anything special. Then I talked to David Littman and other people including Ron Grienke and they suggested that I build the shed a different way and go in for a fertilising program to suit hard-cane Dendrobiums. It has really worked wonders. At present I have about 300 standard Catts, 200 hard-cane Dens. and a small collection of Vandacious plus various other genera.

I started growing orchids in 1989. With only 14 years growing experience I do not have the knowledge of people that have been growing orchids for 40 to 50 years but I am prepared to try things that may suit my culture. By changing watering and fertilising programs as well as experimenting with different media I think I have achieved good results. I am now getting to the stage that I am obtaining show bench quality flowers.

I flower my plants twice and if they are not to show-bench standard I pass them on to make room for new little ones. Hybridisation has gone that far ahead that many older type plants have been left behind. You only have so much room, I have just built another shed and that is already near full.

The main points for culture would be good air movement and not a lot of water, people have a tendency to over water. I use an overhead watering system. In summer I water twice a week for 25 minutes and in winter once a week for 25 minutes. In the flowering season I hand water. I installed watering systems because I do not like to ask people to look after the orchids when I am away. Firstly there are not too many around the neighbourhood that understand them. Secondly some people have a different line of thought to mine. You come home after six weeks away and you don't know what to expect so I just put the controllers on and leave it. If you lose one or two you just have to accept that.



Typical of improved growth

My Dendrobium growing houses are 70% white shade cloth and neutral Solarweave. The neutral seems better to me than the white. A lot of people have had trouble with the white and they believe it is due to the limited light spectrum that is able to penetrate it. During winter the Solarweave protects the roof and three sides with the eastern side covered with only shade cloth. In summer the Solarweave is removed from all sides and only the roof remains covered by Solarweave.

When I first started with Dendrobiums I built my small shed with the hip of the roof facing the east, I was told that this was the best thing to do so you had your hip facing the east to get the morning sun. I found that to be incorrect so two years after I turned the shed around, took the hip off and made one big slope to the north and that was a dramatic improvement. What I went by was the solar hot water systems, they are

always on the north, so if they put that there to catch the warmth that is what I need to do for my orchids. Both my Den. sheds only have one big slope down towards the north. They catch the sun from about 10 in the morning until around 3 in the afternoon. This may not work for other people but for me it has been very good.

In September I fertilise all my plants once a week. Then from October to December I fertilise the Cattleyas once a week and the hard-cane Dens. twice a week using high nitrogen about 25 -30%. By doing this I feel that it provides that additional growth. I believe that when you can get good growth you get good flowers to follow. In January I go back to a higher potassium fertiliser say about 10.10.10 and that seems to work very well. I use Aqua-K, Aqua-Feed and Peters. I find that is all I need. They are applied at the recommended rate. From May through to September none of my orchids get any fertiliser. During our cold winters the roots of most genera seal up.



Inside the Dendrobium shed.

This winter it has been down to -2°C and I had plants burnt off with the frost on the eastern side of the shed.

During summer the floors are watered at 10am, 12n and 2pm everyday for about 4 minutes. This creates the humidity that you need. Most of it is all automatic with the timers reset once or twice a year. The floors are gravel and are sprayed once or twice a year to keep the weeds down. I find that if you rake them every couple of weeks you don't get a lot of grass coming through.

I spray mid September and again mid November and then mid February and that's all they get in the way of pest control. You must be very careful when spraying with pesticides and I have a large apron that goes right down to the tips of my boots, long gloves and a double respirator. After the sheds have been sprayed they are not entered for two days. They get an occasional spray of fungicide when the weather is wet and I see an indication of root rot.

I set myself small achievable goals. Sometimes I don't achieve them but I try. I think if people did that they wouldn't loose site of the fact that there is a growing and reward side but there is also the pleasurable side to orchid growing.

