



# Orchid Society of Santa Barbara

*Meeting: Wednesday, August 11, 2004*

**Louise Lowry Davis Recreation Center  
1232 De La Vina (at De La Vina and Victoria)**

*Meeting begins at 7:30 pm*

## **PROGRAM**

**Paul Chim** of May On Nursery  
will speak about  
**Chinese Cymbidiums**

Cymbidium lovers and non-cymbidium lovers can agree on the graceful beauty of Chinese cymbidiums. This month's speaker has been growing cymbidiums for almost 40 years, is a co-founder of the Golden Gate Cymbidium Society, is past president of several societies including the Orchid Society of California, and is an accredited Cymbidium Society of America judge. Paul Chim specializes in cool growing orchids, both species and hybrids, and has for several years led orchid groups to China. Come and hear about Chinese cymbidiums from someone with expertise and insight. And bring raffle money; Paul Chim will provide the raffle table!

## **CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS**

October 8-10, 2004 **San Diego International Orchid Fair.** Exhibit Hall, San Diego County Fairgrounds, Del Mar. Friday: 1-8. Saturday 8-5. Sunday 8-4

November 13-14, 2004 **Orchid Society of Santa Barbara Fall Orchid Show.** Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

Check out our web site! [www.west.net/~orchidsb](http://www.west.net/~orchidsb)

OSSB Officers for 2004: President – Phil Watt Vice President – Don Brown Secretary – Heidi Kirkpatrick

## Summary of the July 2004 Meeting

► **President Phil Watt** welcomed visitors and guests.

► As an affiliated society, OSSB has a representative to the AOS. We are fortunate enough to have Al Svoboda, the AOS Conservation Committee chair, as our rep. Note that Sandy Svoboda is an AOS trustee and the Outreach Committee chair.

- The Advisory Panel on Orchid Registration has put out new rules on how to name orchid hybrids. Note that there were 2500 new hybrids in the last six months.
- Marion Allen, the Affiliated Societies Liaison, has expressed the AOS concern that older members may need help with their collections. The first contact for help should be the local orchid society, so fine collections are not lost in emergencies or when older growers need help.

► Al Svoboda noted that manned tables at fairs and shows really work to increase membership. Karen Muir and Harold Koopowitz sold 40 *Orchid Digest* subscriptions at the Orchid Fair.

### Program

Vice President Don Brown introduced our July speaker, second generation orchidist George Vazquez of Zuma Canyon Orchids. Vazquez presented an updated survey on how to grow *Phalaenopsis*.

The first condition to consider is temperature. Phals prefer temperatures of 68°F to 75°F, but will tolerate 65°F to 85°F. If you need a sweeter, your phal will be uncomfortable. The exception is a few nights of 60°F to 64°F to initiate spikes. This does not limit phals to indoors or greenhouses; Vazquez noted that phals grow successfully outdoors if protected from rain and set atop a heat mat (propagation mats sold for warming seedlings). The heat mat can be set to keep the leaves at the proper nighttime (and daytime!) temperatures.

Phals prefer 70% humidity, though high humidity and low air flow can encourage mealybug and scale. In the home, humidity can be helped with pebble trays or grated humidity trays. Home growers should place plants by a south facing window, but not in direct sun. North facing windows also work for phals. West and East exposures are not so successful, because they do not simulate proper summer and winter day lengths.

Vazquez told the membership that phals grow where it rains daily. That said, the easiest way to kill them is through overwatering. Additionally, they should be watered from the side to avoid water collecting in and rotting the crown of the plant.

Vazquez has recently changed the potting mix

he uses for the phals at his nursery. When he first got into orchids, it was the end of the tree fern era. Now, tree fern is expensive, endangered, and hard to find. For many years, he grew in bark. But Vazquez finds that today's bark is too soft and rots too quickly. If the bark is not sifted and cleaned before potting, the silt and soft chunks rot inside the pot.

Among other potential mixes is coconut, often used with bark and perlite. Vazquez feels that even the prewashed product retains too many salts. Lava rock is also often used with bark, but Vazquez again dislikes its salt capacity; he noted that it is hard on the hands when repotting, and also hard on roots.

His medium of choice is now Chilean sphagnum moss. Tasmanian moss is the best, followed by New Zealand and Chilean, which is sufficient for his purposes. Vazquez observed that Chinese and Wisconsin sphagnum are not preferred.

Moss holds 8 times more water than bark. For Vazquez as a commercial grower, this means less cost in water; he waters less frequently (once every 2 to 3 weeks) and uses less water per watering. Additionally, he uses a tenth the fertilizer he used when growing in bark. However, moss is unforgiving of the grower who overwaters.

Vazquez demonstrated his potting technique for phals. He removes old moss every several years, or if the plant has problems. Healthy young plants get repotted every 6 months, with a little new moss added to the old and the rootball undisturbed as the plant is slid into a larger pot. Mature plants are repotted every two years. He layers the pot bottom with Styrofoam peanuts, the non-degradable kind, to prevent roots from growing out the drainage holes. (Vazquez recommended testing your peanuts with water if you are unsure which kind you have. You want the ones that don't absorb water or dissolve.)

If a plant has problems, he cleans out all the moss and removes dead roots. As a trick to prevent crown rot, he tucks a piece or two of styrofoam immediately beneath the crown, then places fresh moss loosely around the roots. The plant should be stable in the pot, but he does not like to compress the moss. There should be an inch left between the moss and the top of the pot so water can collect and soak into the moss. Vazquez recommended strongly not to overpot. The roots should just fit into the pot.

Vazquez noted that sometimes one must cut the spike to save the plant, as spikes and roots grow at the same time. Also, he does not recommend cutting spikes above the third node to encourage rebranching. Flowers will be 20% smaller and fewer and the health of the plant will be compromised.

## To Water or Not to Water (Or Orchid Growing for Santa Barbarans, Part 2)

By Heidi Kirkpatrick

To water or not to water: That is the question. It seems so simple. “Moist, not wet.” “Let it dry out a little between waterings, but not bone dry.” Figuring out how often to water is one of the first challenges faced by a new orchid grower, and a challenge that often remains to face even experienced growers.

Here is some of the common wisdom:

- If in doubt, wait another day to water.
- Wait until the pot begins to feel light when lifted.
- Orchids die more quickly from overwatering than from underwatering.
- Water when the medium an inch down into the pot is dry.
- Most hobbyists overwater.

Judging the moisture content of the mix by the weight of the pot takes experience. It is a useful check, but who wants to lift all the pots in their collection to decide when to water? And not all orchid mixes lend themselves to the touch test. It might be fine to stick your finger down into sphagnum moss, but that doesn't work so well with perlite and Diatomite.

So how often do OSSB members water?

In my very unscientific survey of fellow OSSB members, I have found a range of watering frequencies. Al and Sandy water every 5 days, and more often in warm weather. Their mounted plants receive water every 1 to 2 days, with misters going off every couple hours to increase humidity. Dick Swain also waters every 5 days. His sprinklers are set on a timer that runs for 25 minutes to thoroughly saturate the mix. He notes that he does manipulate the timer if the weather is unusually rainy or unusually hot.

On the other end of the scale, Ed and Shirlye Carter water every other week, with heavy daily misting. Our July Speaker, George Vazquez, waters every two to three weeks.

Other growers are somewhere in between. Don Brown waters weekly, varying his frequency if the weather is wetter or hotter than normal. I water weekly as a matter of convenience (the spouse and my three-year-old have play time Sunday mornings), though I suspect my plants would be happier being watered every 8 to 10 days in all but the hottest weather. I try to water the mounted things more often and don't always succeed, which has weeded my mounted collection down to the most tolerant plants.

What is the answer to the watering dilemma?

There is no single right answer; but instead different methods that work for individual growers. Some folks grow dry – in home growers, those growing outdoors in the foothills. Others grow wet – folks living with the Mesa fog, greenhouse growers with efficient humidifiers.

What is more useful is to weigh “dry” versus “wet” factors. Consider then some things that make a collection dry out more quickly:

- mounted plants
- small pots
- a mix with big chunks, or one that doesn't absorb water, like Paul Gripp's granite pebbles.
- growing outdoors in low humidity and heat
- outdoor wind or good greenhouse air circulation

Compare these with things that make a collection stay wet:

- big pots, or any size pot if the plant is overpotted
- cool, cloudy, humid or wet weather
- poor air circulation
- a mix with small pieces, or organic mixes like bark or coconut that have begun to decompose
- sphagnum moss

Setting aside the issue of frequency, a grower might now consider the quality of the water drenching his or her orchids. Here, I can comfortably state a hard and fast rule: *Do not use water from your water softener on your plants.* That sodium making the water feel so nice will kill off your plants.

Common wisdom says that orchids like relatively pure water, which our city tap water is not. But a survey of our members reveals a broad variety of water preferences. Dick Swain has wonderful cymbidiums every spring show and uses city water, as do the Carters. Don Brown has well water with about half the solids of municipal water, though he claims to see little difference between well water and city water for most of the orchids he has grown. He does have a small reverse osmosis system for a few particularly sensitive things, such as disas or masdevallias.

On the other end of the spectrum, Bill Robson has an elaborate reverse osmosis system. Al Svoboda says his deionized water has made a difference for his plants. And Norm Wieder collects and stores rainwater – perhaps closest to what orchids normally would receive; in good years, he can get through much of the summer using rainwater.

Just remember that most orchids grow naturally with their roots dangling in the air. They love water, but they don't want to sit in it!

### Announcements

▶ **No August BBQ.** There will be no Society BBQ-picnic this year. Alice Gripp of the Santa Barbara Orchid Estate graciously offered to host the BBQ again this year, but no members stepped forward to organize the event.

▶ **Roster Update.** Jeff Thompson has a new email address: jeffrey93105@cox.net

▶ **Jacket Found.** A Pacific Trails jacket, size XL, was left at the meeting several months back. It has a slate gray exterior and a navy interior, with a hidden hood and an interior cell phone pocket. Call Jeff Thompson at 563-4376 if this is your jacket.

▶ **OSSB Booth at Horticultural Society Sale.** Don Brown has generously offered to run a society sales booth at the Hort Sale on Saturday, September 19, with the help of his daughter Rosminah and Josh Davis. All profits are to benefit the OSSB special speakers fund. If you have plants (not necessarily orchids) to donate to the sale, bring them to MacKenzie Park that morning. If you would like to deliver plants ahead of time, Rosminah has offered to receive them while Don is out of town. Plants should be healthy and priced to sell.

### Water Testing

Complimenting the water theme of this month's newsletter, Jeff Thompson will bring his Total Dissolved Solids Meter to the August meeting. Several members have asked how to measure the parts per million (ppm) of dissolved solids in their water or fertilizer without sending off to an expensive lab. Now is your chance to get an estimate of what you really are feeding your orchids! Jeff says you need to bring the following to the meeting:

- 1) the regular water you give your orchids
- 2) the fertilizer water you give your orchids (regular water plus whatever fertilizer you normally add)
- 3) the formulation of the fertilizer

Thanks to Jeff for offering this service!