

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



Photos by Mira Vanchiswar, see inside and in [Photo Gallery](#) for more
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A new challenge: Orchids

Late last fall, I met Bill Smile, the “orchid man.” I knew at once that I wanted to get to know him better and pick his brain about orchids. Friendly chap that he is, I found myself with an open invitation to come and visit. So, taking my family along to enjoy this treat, I went to see Bill and his orchid collection just before the start of the new year.

You know, when one is in the middle of winter and spring seems only a distant possibility, time spent in a greenhouse has quite a restorative effect. And time spent in a greenhouse full of orchids is positively sublime. All at once you feel transported to all sorts of exotic locations. Bill’s glass house is chock full of this specie, myriad varieties abound. One thing you quickly realize is that the greenhouse is designed to go from warm to cool in temperature so as to mimic the conditions that the different types of orchids require in nature. And that was the important lesson: In order to get the healthiest plants, one must give them the conditions they expect naturally. This is true for all plants.

I have never really grown orchids but have always been fascinated by them. To learn about orchids has been on my list for a long time. Of course, I was not so deluded as to think that I’d do all my learning on this one occasion. This was to be merely my introduction.

Don’t be intimidated

A few years ago, I had visited the Singapore Botanical Gardens and seen their marvelous orchid collection. I have never failed to visit the annual orchid show at the New York Botanical Gardens in the Bronx. But while they succeed in impressing, they can intimidate the novice orchid grower. The showy orchid flowers are like the very beautiful people that one feels too inadequate to befriend. But there in Bill’s greenhouse, I was so comfortable. The plants looked friendly and approachable. Don’t misunderstand, fabulous flowers abounded but somehow, they gave the impression of being just like other plants. I could handle that.

Bill does not make orchid growing sound easy but he doesn’t make it seem too hard either. Funny, the

more he talked, the more I felt that I could do this. Rather, that I wanted to do this. Now, I'm not going to give you a lesson on orchids as I'm ill qualified and besides, this is not the place for a major lesson in orchid cultivation. There is sufficient literature available. However, if you have any specific questions, send them to me and I will ask Bill. How terrific to have someone with his expertise and experience right here in Chappaqua. Exploit I say!

I've taken on a Vampire orchid as a challenge

The true treasures of his greenhouse, at least to me, were the miniature, more uncommon orchids. They were so subtly beautiful. I fell in love with them. Bill, observing my attraction (okay, my greed), gave me one I especially admired. He has also given me a Vampire orchid as a challenge. Apparently they are not so easy to grow. I'm going to do my best to succeed. What I know so far from Bill is that in general, orchids like to have good air circulation and this includes the roots. They require some humidity, and the temperature and light must be appropriate to the specific natural habitat.

Bill told me that over the years he's fine-tuned the types of orchids he can or prefers to grow. When he told me his age, it was a real surprise because the man looks and moves like someone at least twenty years younger. Forget his genes, I think it's the orchids, ever mysterious and exotic.

I would like to express my profound gratitude to Bill Smile. His generosity of time, advice and plants is greatly appreciated. Mostly, I'm so glad to have made a new friend.

