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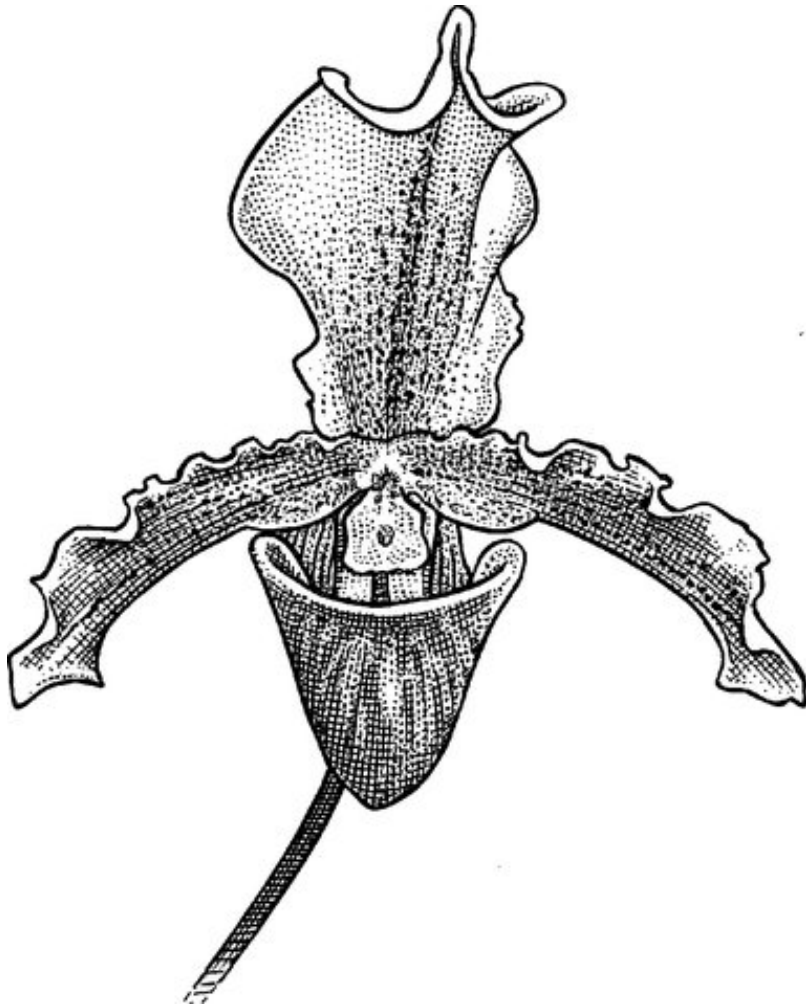
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Roses Are Red, Orchids Are Addictive

Families struggle when flower obsession strikes a loved one; 'God help us'

By Daniela Hernandez

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Flower power

About a year ago, 11-year-old David Marcovici started collecting orchids. Since then, he's amassed a few dozen that have turned the family kitchen into a mini-rainforest. His favorites are miniatures, which he calls his "little guys."

He brought \$267—all his savings—to spend at a recent orchid show in New Jersey. Then it was on to another show earlier this month. "God help us," says his dad, Geno.

Orchid lovers really love their orchids. Many describe their hobby as an addiction. It has a name in many circles: Orchidelirium.

For the people who love orchid lovers, living with their obsession is a lesson in acceptance.

Collectors will often go to extremes: Traveling far—and paying top dollar—for rare specimens; rescuing discarded plants off the street; determinedly collecting specimens of a species like children collecting Pokémon cards; and, often, turning their living spaces into veritable jungles.



David Marcovici, 11, at an orchid show in New Jersey. PHOTO: DANIELA HERNANDEZ/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In his Upper West Side apartment, Michael Riley wanted to recreate how orchids grow in nature. They hang from trees

and rocks. They don't grow in pots. To mimic the ecosystems he visited around the world, he outfitted two walls with plywood, a thick rubber membrane, and sheets of cork he bought through a specialty vendor. To the cork, he pins the plants' roots, which he covers in moss to help them acclimate. An automated misting system, similar to those grocery stores use to keep produce wet, hangs near the ceiling.

"It's a hobby gone wild," he said.

His partner, Francisco Correa Mendoza, does a lot of plant care, but the pay is lousy, the couple jokes.

Orchids, among the planet's most diverse family of plants, have long captured the imagination of hobbyists. In the Victorian Age, wealthy Europeans contracted orchid hunters who would travel to South America, Africa and Asia in search of rare specimens. Often collectors would instruct their envoys to misdirect competitors or destroy whatever they couldn't take to prevent others from finding the same flowers.

Now, the scouting is mostly reserved to online shops, auctions and orchid-show season, which roughly spans January to March.

At the same orchid show where Mr. Marcovici was chasing his son from vendor to vendor, Aga



Michael Riley fashioned his Upper West Side apartment in cork to allow his orchids to grow in a more natural environment.

PHOTO: DANIELA HERNANDEZ/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Montes was on the hunt for an *Epicattleya* Rene Marques, a yellow-and-fuchsia dendrobium she says is hard to find.

“Ever since I saw it at the [New York Botanical] Garden, I wanted one,” said the 31-year-old chemist, who was dressed in orchid-embroidered pants. “And of course I won’t steal from the Garden.”

She bought two from a Taiwanese retailer. Each plant was \$30. By the time she hit that stand, she’d already dropped more than \$100.

Her flowers take up an entire room in her three-bedroom home in New Jersey, with more sprinkled throughout the house. She stopped counting after she topped 100, in part because then her “hubby can’t say, ‘Well, you already have 500,’ ” she said.

He made her promise she’d keep his desk orchid-free. “He doesn’t mind it as long as he has room to sit,” she said.

Fans say growing orchids can be relaxing, plus it provides them with a sense of accomplishment and a community. While some orchids still have steep price tags, in recent decades, orchid collecting has taken root beyond the elites, thanks to technological advances that have made commercial growing cheaper and easier.

Phalaenopsis, or the “moth orchid,” which is the gateway plant for many modern collectors, often costs only about \$10 at grocery stores.

Social media and the internet have also seeded new ways for orchidphiles to indulge. Orchids’ ornate and colorful flowers fit well into social media’s cult of pretty, according to growers. Younger fans call themselves plant parents and take to Instagram, YouTube and Facebook to



Aga Montes was on the hunt for an *Epicattleya* Rene Marques with a yellow-and-fuchsia dendrobium orchid at a New Jersey orchid show. PHOTO: DANIELA HERNANDEZ/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

show off their blooms, share growing tips and make new friends. The more popular ones, who can have thousands of followers, are known as “plantfluencers.”

“There’s this really nasty stigma out there...that orchids are hard,” said Chris Satch, who promotes the hashtag #orchidsareforeveryone to his roughly 3,800 Instagram followers. “It’s just retraining your mind to think, ‘What does this plant want?’ ”

About four years ago, a friend gave Mr. Satch a coconut orchid, a lush, blood-red flower that typically grows in Mexico and Central America and smells like coconut cream pie.

“It’s the best thing in the world to wake up to,” he said. “It gave me the orchid disease.”

Mr. Satch, 27, now shares his small New York City apartment with roughly 90 orchids—plus a human. His dendrobiums, oncidiums, cattleyas and other orchids inhabit the window sills in his

bathroom, kitchen and living room. But his most prized plants, including an octopus orchid, he keeps in his bedroom on shelves he built himself, where they enjoy a humidifier and special light fixtures.

He had to bargain with his new roommate, Koko Lawson, to get the bedroom with the windows—for his orchids' health, Ms. Lawson, 28, said. He pays a little more in rent. When the two moved in together a few months ago, Mr. Satch warned her about his plant obsession.

She asked him if it was “Jumanji-level,” to which he replied “sort of,” she recalled.

She accepted his plant family, but told him she wanted no part in taking care of them.



Will Wilson, 18, at an orchid show in New Jersey. PHOTO: DANIELA HERNANDEZ/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Before
Will
Wilson
moved to
a bigger
house
outside
New
Haven,
Conn.,
with his
mom and
stepdad,
his



Mr. Wilson keeps his collection in a spare bedroom. PHOTO: WILL WILSON

orchids “took up every spare counter space we had,” he said. In their new place, his collection of nearly 300 orchids is mostly contained to a spare bedroom, though there is still some spillover.

“It was almost forced upon me. Not that I complained, of course,” said the 18-year-old high-schooler, who wants to study plant genetics in college.

The good news for family harmony is that his mom, Mary Ellen, is now collecting orchids, too. “I’ve been infected,” she joked.

The bad news: She wants to expand her collection of 40 orchids into the back of the house, and her husband “just doesn’t know it yet.”

Write to Daniela Hernandez at daniela.hernandez@wsj.com

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