

SAVING SLIPPER ORCHIDS

Building a Living Museum of Historic Slippers at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens

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FOR MANY ORCHID FANCIERS, slipper orchids—the common name for the Cypripedioideae, mainly *Paphiopedilums*, *Phragmipediums* and *Cypripediums*—are among their most prized plants. But like a person fleeing a storm and deciding which of one's most prized objects to rescue, how do you select which of your prized orchids should be saved? Which orchids stand out in terms of beauty, value, breakthrough breeding or other qualities that speak to you?

Such were the challenges confronting the Orchid Society of Western Pennsylvania (OSWP) and Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens (Phipps) when they established a Memorandum of Understanding in 2011, cementing a partnership that invited the OSWP to help Phipps acquire and display orchids of excellence. A history of cooperation and active volunteering has existed between the OSWP and Phipps for over two decades, culminating in this formal agreement naming OSWP as an expert consultant who would provide orchid knowledge, hands-on help, and recommendations for acquisitions to the Conservatory. This partnership, eponymously named "P-OSI," the Phipps-Orchid Society Initiative, takes volunteering by an orchid society to a new level by systematically lending our members' combined expertise in focused ways to advise the Conservatory's decision makers.

The OSWP, an affiliate of the American Orchid Society and *Orchid Digest*, is a robust group of mainly hobby growers who have long volunteered at Phipps, Pittsburgh's great steel and glass Victorian Conservatory that has been inviting visitors to explore the beauty and mysteries of plants since 1893. Today Phipps is a national leader in promoting conservation awareness and spearheading green building initiatives. The proposed signature orchid collection envisioned under the

P-OSI memorandum would showcase the Conservatory's historic prominence while spotlighting its 21st century commitment to conservation. In addition, Phipps is in the process of applying to the North America Plant Collection Consortium (NAPCC) to be the designated Center for Slipper Orchids for their preservation and genetic resource availability.

"We are so grateful for this partnership with the OSWP. The energy, enthusiasm and expertise that this group brings to the project have helped us to make real progress in moving forward with expansion and refinement of this collection," states Margie Radebaugh, Phipps' Director of Horticulture and Education.

In early dialogue that reflected many OSWP members' slipper orchid preferences, it was decided that the first P-OSI focus would be to build a "living museum of historic slipper species and hybrids." Other P-OSI objectives include orchid education and providing plants and pollen for research. Several factors were at play: in addition to considering cultural needs, variety, and well-documented public interest and attendance at Phipps' annual Orchid and Tropical Bonsai Show, OSWP members also felt a sense of urgency to locate historic plants now, while they are still viable in existing collections but are at potential risk of being eventually overlooked or thrown away as growers seek to take advantage of the myriad advances in slipper breeding.

Because paphiopedilums are the largest group of the Cypripedioideae, it was decided that *Paph.* species and historically significant hybrids would be the first section on which to work. An additional survey on phragmipediums is intended as a stage two follow-up. Finding historical specimens was important because many of the early species discoveries have been so refined through careful line breeding that their current appearance varies from the original collected prototypes. Similarly, trends and advances in hybridizing paphs often place older plants on a collection's endangered list. Finding and preserving divisions of original specimens of some of the oldest slipper species and hybrids became P-OSI's working goal. By bringing these treasures together into a single, focused, curated collection, P-OSI could help ensure that these plants would continue to enchant future paph growers for generations.

A living museum of historically important slipper species and hybrids is a novel approach to education. Here the public is invited to see breakthrough historic slipper orchids firsthand, rather than viewing them through the distilled lens of photographs or representational botanical drawings. This journey of discovery also encourages visitors to develop an appreciation of advances in contemporary breeding since the selected



Welcome center, Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens.

plants would highlight important lineage.

Finding “must have” slipper orchids is a daunting challenge. In our global economy, with scientific advances in breeding and new species still being discovered, the number of man-made hybrids has increased exponentially. The latest estimate from the American Orchid Society website is that there are 23,871 *Paphiopedilum* hybrids alone. In deciding how best to navigate the complex maze of choices, the researchers needed a way to achieve expert consensus so that the intended plant acquisitions would be strategically focused and representative of milestone accomplishments.

Plan of action for a Historic *Paphiopedilum* Hybrids Survey

The OSWP’s plan was developed after much discussion spearheaded by its P-OSI’s leaders. It was decided to execute a concurrent strategy: first, identifying and recruiting an expert panel, while simultaneously thinking through questionnaire construction. Because of the survey’s pragmatic intent—to suggest specific plants for Phipps’ acquisition—and given the realities of Phipps’ limited financial resources and growing space, it was essential that the survey be focused and promote comparable discussion about what *paphiopedilums* the Conservatory should try to acquire and why.

Selecting the Key Informant Panel

The key informants—highly knowledgeable growers and breeders whose recognized expertise qualified them as candidates for informing the framework for the proposed historic slipper acquisitions—were located in a two-stage process. Initially calls for help were sent to several experts in the slipper community, and this first group then identified other likely respondents. The Slipper Orchid Alliance (based in Pittsburgh) and Bill and Lynn Goldner of the Washington-based *Paphiopedilum* Forum allowed us to publicize our search to determine “must have” historical specimens. Tim Culbertson and Paphanatics’ Norito Hasagawa also played an important role by soliciting other slipper specialists and vouching for the report’s integrity. As a result of these concerted efforts, sixteen *paph* experts of those 30 key informants contacted were willing to share their knowledge by fully completing the survey.

Organization of the Survey

The survey focused on historic *Paph.* hybrids, including specific clones. The questionnaire was divided into decades, starting with the first hybrid registered in 1869 and continuing to the year 2000. In each decade, ten *Paph.* hybrids were listed that P-OSI had pre-selected on the basis of the number of awards, offspring, and progeny as reported in OrchidWiz. Respondents were then asked to identify the *Paph.* hybrids which they thought were the most historically important and to explain their reasons. Although we expected that the

rationales would be varied, we wanted to learn more about the dimensions of choice. Finally, to cast a wider net, the questionnaire included space for the informants to identify hybrids they wanted to be considered that had not been listed in the survey’s initial limited-choice options.

General and Specific Outcomes

The only two unanimous choices for the most important historic hybrid were *Paph.* F. C. Puddle and *Paph.* Hellas (16 votes each), with *Paph.* Maudiae and *Paph.* Winston Churchill running a close second (15 votes each). Each decade’s “Top Picks” will be published in an article, “Selecting Slippers: Results of the P-OSI Historic *Paphiopedilum* Hybrids Survey,” appearing in *Slipper Orchids*, *The Slipper Orchid Alliance Journal*, Volume 14, Number 2, Summer 2013. The complete survey results, including specific clones and reasons, are also available by clicking “Quick Link to the Complete *Paph* Survey with clones” at <http://www.oswp.org>.

The Barbara Tisherman Slipper Orchid Collection at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens

In recognition of the OSWP’s collaboration in the strategic development of Phipps’ slipper orchid collection and of Barbara Tisherman’s important role in the OSWP and national and international orchid communities, Phipps has announced the naming of the *Barbara Tisherman Slipper Orchid Collection at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens*. As an accredited American Orchid Society judge and founder and President of the Slipper Orchid Alliance, Ms. Tisherman has extensively promoted slipper orchid alliance awareness, education and standards and has used her numerous contacts to publicize the search for historically significant slippers and more.

To celebrate this honor, the OSWP will be hosting a Super Slipper Celebration at the Phipps Conserva-



Barbara Tisherman, President of the Slipper Orchid Alliance, holding her *Phragmipedium* Don Wimber ‘Nancy’ AM/AOS, CCE/AOS.

tory, Pittsburgh, PA on Saturday, October 5, 2013. The “speakers’ day” features four slipper experts who will emphasize historical pathways and the newest progeny. The speakers will be Hadley Cash, New Directions for Novelty Slippers; Tim Culbertson, Acknowledging the Finest: 120 Years of Important Paphs Preserved at



Paph. expert, Norito Hasagawa consulting on the collection at Phipps.

Phipps; Glen Decker, Trends in Phragmipedium Hybridizing; Dr. Holger Perner, The New – the Rare – and the Unusual.

The evening Gala also invites attendees to participate in behind-the-scenes tours of Phipps’ orchid-growing greenhouses, to experience the renowned beauty of the Conservatory, and to attend a gala celebration that includes food, the award ceremony, and an original orchid-themed entertainment. All will be open to the public by reservation. For more information, visit <http://www.oswp.org/> or contact richraiff@gmail.com.

Finding historic orchids starts with you, the collectors and growers. If you own a rare or significant specimen that you are interested in donating to the slipper collection, or if you would like to contribute to the Barbara Tisherman slipper orchid endowment at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, please contact Assistant Curator of Horticulture Ben Dunigan at bdunigan@phipps.conservatory.org; 412/622-6915, ext. 6622. All contributions are tax-deductible. Our efforts have already attracted the donation of some important plants but we need your help in preserving our slipper heritage.*

Acknowledgements

Many OSWP members have been involved, led by Demetria Marsh, Nancy Kline, John Whiting and Georgia Wahl, Phipps Orchid Horticulturist. Barbara Tisherman, our resident AOS Judge and President of the Slipper Orchid Alliance has offered expert leadership.

About the Author

Norma Raiff is President of the Orchid Society of Western Pennsylvania and Co-Chair of the Super Slipper Celebration to be held in the fall of 2013.



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