

Orchid Gems – Tim Choltco

By: Norma Raiff

Orchid lover, breeder, botanist, in-demand speaker and entrepreneur: That's long-term OSWP member Tim Choltco. With his mother Judie's encouragement, Tim first joined our society as a young teenager. Today he's one of our long-term members, with a tenure of 35 years and counting.



A self-described “plant geek”, Tim’s interests span house and garden growing, breeding and lecturing. *“It all started out with small garden in our back yard and then things got out of control.”* His expanding list of “must haves” eventually embraced houseplants, African violets, and orchids -- and that’s just the short list!

Tim has a BS in biology/botany from Penn State. He now focuses on the more unusual orchid genera, some of which he breeds. His work has been published on four continents and includes descriptions of species in the genera *Trichoglottis*, *Tuberolabium*, *Vanda* and most recently (January 2018) *Habenaria*.

How long have you been growing orchids? Tim and his mom Judie attended their first orchid show in 1983. He purchased three phalaenopsis and joined the society. And, yes, he laughingly admits, because orchids were then considered pretty much an upper class hobby, there was a touch of class envy involved.

Current collection and growing environment: Tim grows on his windowsills and in his basement “grow room.” *“It’s a whole room that is half of my basement that has been converted to an indoor greenhouse by adding lights.”* When asked about his collection, Tim tells us: *“A conservative guess is that I have about 500 adult plants and 100s and 100s of seedlings and flasks. The number changes constantly.”* Tim’s Paph. Stone Lovely ‘Harbinger’ was awarded an HCC/AOS in 2017.

Among Tim’s current loves are *Bulbophyllums*, the largest genus of orchids, which is also known to contain some real stinkers. His *Bulbophyllum tingabarinum* grows above his kitchen sink and flowers from June to October. *“It’s one of my favorite plants and its only three inches tall and it’s almost double that when in spike.”* He also brought *Bulb. Doggy Doo* (the name tells it all) to a Show and Tell and entertained us in June by exhibiting a plant which made its presence known by attracting what felt like every fly within a two mile radius.

Tim is also into orchid and other plant breeding. *“I started going more seriously into experimenting with new breeding lines or propagating something that’s rare or just unusual.”* He’s focusing on *Bulbophyllum* because they are different, exotic, and often underrepresented in home collections. *“They are an underdeveloped genus with a lot of potential. I’m trying to breed for color and, yes, perhaps even to breed the smell out of them.”* Tim is also breeding *Habenaria* with the aim of creating new hybrids with the genera *Cynorkis*, *Pecteilis*, and *Stenoglottis*.

Funniest/weirdest mistake or experience: When I was away at university, I received an excited phone call from my mother notifying me that my *Laelia anceps* had finally flowered. The spike was three feet long and the flowers were up in the basement *ceiling rafters!* Tim also reminisces how his mom almost flipped the lawn mower over because she was so ecstatic at seeing his *Cypripedium parviflorum var. pubescens* blooming in the garden for the first time.

When did you join the society and why? Tim credits many OSWP relationships as pivotal to his long-term involvement. *“Honestly, a lot of people...made a difference. But there was more than that: “I was a young kid and you guys took me seriously. The orchid society is inclusive.”*

OSWP meetings whetted his appetite. *“Every time I was at a Show and Tell it was another kick to my orchid addiction...Eventually I expanded my collection to include every orchid that I considered that I might be able to grow.”*

Tim is a great example of an involved OSWP member: he participates in our orchid hikes, P-OSI and Phun at Phipps. He and Lori McDermott were elected OSWP 1st Co-Vice Presidents this June.

You might also be interested to know this about me: Tim’s an in-demand speaker on topics that include *“Bulbophyllums: A Brief Survey”, “Habenaria”, and “Sex, Lies and Orchids.”* He’s spoken at Phipps and at many orchid societies including those in Erie and Maryland, the Orchid Society of Northwest PA, and of course, the OSWP. Tim’s also an invited garden club speaker and presents talks on such general plant topics as *“Perennials for the Heat of Summer”, “Plant Diversity”, and “Native Perennials.”*

Have you ever heard of Harbinger Orchids? Well that is Tim’s business. *“It’s actually been in the works for 20 years.”* Sadly, just as Tim was first getting started in 2004, Hurricane Ivan arrived, causing the creek across from Tim’s house to overflow, thus drowning almost all the orchids that were growing in the basement. *“We were only able to rescue three! It was rough. It took the better part of a year to get over the depression of the loss. So I threw away the idea of starting a business and just concentrated at that point on building a collection again.”*

Right now Tim is at the point of realizing his dream. Harbinger Orchids (harbingerorchids.com) is a home-based business that will help fund Tim’s collection cravings and breeding interests. He’s going to be primarily selling flasks: *“Right now I have a lot of Bulbophyllums, mini Bulbophyllums, and a few odd species.”* Many more *Bulbophyllum* and many *Habenaria* crosses are currently in mother flasks. Tim’s also cultivating Japanese and Chinese Jack-in-the-Pulpits (*Arisaema*), Corpse Flowers (*Amorphophallus* and *Sauromatum*) and other related non-orchid genera that thrive in wildflower or shaded gardens.

Want to see Tim’s “stuff” first hand? He is the long-time host of OSWP’s annual picnic, scheduled for July 15. Come see Tim’s orchids and grow room, and explore his beautiful gardens with their impressive collection of Day Lilies, Hostas, Arums and Trilliums.

So search out the picnic directions elsewhere in this newsletter, sign up, and be prepared for an afternoon of plant discovery, good eats, and overall fun.