

# BUILDING A LIVING MUSEUM OF SLIPPER ORCHIDS IN PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

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**I**F YOU ARE A LOVER OF SLIPPER ORCHIDS, have you ever wanted to see or hybridize with such “famous *Paph.* stars” as *Paphs.* F. C. Puddle ‘Bodnant’ AM/AOS, *Orchilla* ‘Chilton’ FCC/AOS, or Winston Churchill ‘Redoubtable’ FCC/AOS . . . the genetic building blocks and classic beauties that are the basis of current slipper breeding? Do these plants even exist anymore...and just where could you see them? An answer to these questions may be found in the work of the Orchid Society of Western Pennsylvania (OSWP) and its innovative Phipps-Orchid Society Initiative (P-OSI).

Almost two years ago, we reported in the *Orchid Digest* on the startup of P-OSI, an exciting joint venture between the renowned Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens and the OSWP. This partnership was intended to upgrade Phipps’ orchid collection by systematically identifying historically important orchids and helping Phipps to acquire them to support its mission of conservation, research, and public enjoyment. A second objective was to develop an OSWP working corps of volunteers that would provide regularly scheduled hands-on effort and access to OSWP’s knowledge and networking resources to the Conservatory. The benefits were two-way: besides helping to maintain an important and exquisite orchid collection, P-OSI energized many OSWP members with a renewed sense of purpose and excitement.

## PROGRESS REPORT

Looking back upon P-OSI activities, we can see that many important milestones were achieved. We also experienced a number of unanticipated benefits and are sharing these as well.

### PHASE #1: Spring-Summer 2011 Kickoff

As detailed in the 2013 Vol. 77-3 *Orchid Digest* article, *Saving Slipper Orchids*, Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens (founded 1893) and the Orchid Society of Western Pennsylvania (founded 1954) have worked together since the society’s beginning.

As is true with many such arrangements, this was sometimes an on-and-off relationship, with OSWP periodically lending help as time and circumstances shifted. In 2011, a surge of interest within both organizations led to a series of informal, formal, and information-sharing meetings during which both leaderships came to the conclusion that the thrust should be formalized through a joint memorandum of understanding and formal approval by both organizations.

P-OSI was officially launched in spring, 2011. Because the main thrust was to systematically develop

and upgrade Phipps’ entire orchid collection, P-OSI teams spent that summer completing an inventory and tagging plants. This concerted effort was a seriously needed initial step: for the first time an up-to-date inventory would be available to determine gaps in the collection and to consider which duplicated plants should be retained for public display purposes, and which were perhaps taking up scarce space or could be traded to other conservatories.

### PHASE #2: 2012 —A Named Collection

A major step-up in the partnership occurred when Phipps graciously acknowledged OSWP’s many years of service by giving us the honor of naming the Conservatory’s Slipper Orchid Collection. The collection, now known as the Barbara Tisherman Slipper Orchid Collection at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens (BTSOC), was designated by the OSWP to honor our long-standing member and past president Barbara Tisherman for her years of local, national, and international service with the OSWP, American Orchid Society, and Slipper Orchid Alliance, of which she is the founder and president.

### PHASE #3: 2012-2013—A Focused Purpose

Beyond OSWP’s hands-on work in tagging, bagging, and inventorying that was already occurring, a second, and more focused P-OSI purpose emerged: that is, to find a way to take advantage of the society’s sophisticated knowledge and interest base. Reflecting many of our members’ personal passions, we began with the existing slipper orchid collection, and within that, to initially focus on *paphiopedilums*, which comprise the largest group of slippers. We asked ourselves, “Which of the myriads of slipper candidates should Phipps be looking to acquire?” This formidable task was strategically approached through the development of an international survey that asked *paph* experts to rate the top historical *paph* hybrids, decade by decade, from 1869-2000. Sixteen experts contributed to the initial list of the most important historical *Paphiopedilum* hybrids Phipps should be seeking. (See Top Picks Summary at [www.oswp.org](http://www.oswp.org).)

### PHASE #4: Fall 2013—Honors and Landmark Achievements

Celebrate success! To honor Barbara Tisherman and to raise funds and project awareness, the OSWP and Phipps hosted the Super Slipper Celebration in October, 2013. This well-attended knockout event highlighted expert speakers, slipper sales, Phipps tours and

a gala. A carry-over session on the following day continued to thank OSWP members for their service and included great lessons from the panel of expert speakers. The Super Slipper Celebration profits enabled the OSWP to donate a substantial sum to the Barbara Tisherman Slipper Orchid Collection for the purpose of beginning to acquire the Top Picks historical paphs that the P-OSI survey had highlighted as well as species.

During the same period, Phipps' reputation as "the place of the slippers" began to be more widely recognized in the conservatory community. One milestone achievement was that the North American Plant Collections Consortium accredited Phipps as a Slipper Orchid Repository, following an onsite visit and rigorous application process. Going forward, Phipps will be able to point to this honor as a reason for slipper lovers to donate the plants we are searching for, as well as being a reason to help financially. And we have also learned that assurances of OSWP's continuing involvement with P-OSI as a guarantor of on-going care and effort have played a role in both the Consortium's accreditation and decisions by other slipper collectors to donate noteworthy plants.

**PHASE #5: 2014 - ongoing—Building the Paph Collection**

In 2014, OSWP members began to contact known paph growers in search of the specific species, hybrids, and clones to acquire through donation or purchase. To date, Phipps has acquired 35% of the *Paphiopedilum* species and the designated important historical hybrids. (See Paph Wish List at [www.oswp.org](http://www.oswp.org).)

Dissemination of our plant Wish List, continuing word-of-mouth, networking through the Paphiopedilum Forum (an annual meeting in Washington, D.C.), publicity through the Slipper Orchid Alliance, and other efforts are continuing to benefit Phipps and to increase the collection. The BTSOC has recently been the recipient of several highly-awarded paphs, including *Paph.* Sierra Sunset 'Woodstream' FCC/AOS and *Paph.* Ron Sims 'Ursa Major' FCC/AOS; these last two were not included in the survey and are significant additions. Furthermore, Phipps has received a major portion of an extensive and valuable paph collection and the offer of another one. Referring to this article's introductory question, we are most happy to report that Phipps has already obtained the following *Paphs*: F. C.



*Paphiopedilum gratrixianum* 'Phipps Best' CCM/AOS

Puddle 'Bodnant,' Orchilla 'Chilton' FCC/AOS, Winston Churchill 'Redoubtable' FCC/AOS, and many other "stars" as a result of our endeavors.

Efforts to acquire the remaining *Paph.* species and important historical hybrids from individuals and conservatories will continue.

**PHASE #6: Fall 2015 - Future—Going Forward: Don't Forget the Phrags**

The Phrag Phase, the next step of P-OSI's journey, is scheduled to begin next fall. Building on our successful pioneering work, we anticipate developing a second survey for phragmipediums. Our plan is to replicate our model of compiling a list of phrag experts who will be asked to share their nominations for the "most important" historical phragmipedium hybrids. The steps in this phase include: writing and distributing the phrag survey, compiling and analyzing the results, and starting to acquire the selected phragmipedium species and hybrids.

We will also continue in our determination to locate and to acquire the remaining most-wanted paphs.

## PHASE #7: Future—The Rest of the Slippers

Finally, when the paph and phrag collections have been substantially expanded, we plan to turn our efforts to building Phipps' cypripedium collection, using the tested tools of surveying experts, studying results, and purposeful acquisition follow-up.

At a future date we will consider adding a mexipedium to the collection. Members of the fifth genus in the slipper orchid alliance, selenipedium, however, have had less success in cultivation, and a venture into them will be further into the future.

## REPORT CARD

As we give ourselves an A for effort and achievements, it's also important to mention our successes over and above the survey's accomplishments and results. The OSWP members, led by Georgia Wahl, Phipps display horticulturist who cares for the orchids, and Ben Dunigan, Phipps curator of horticulture, are working hard to ensure that the slipper collection is maintained and given the best culture possible.

As evidence of achievement, Phipps can point to the many ribbons won at OSWP shows, a trophy for best culture of a paphiopedilum at a Paphiopedilum Forum, and two awarded paphs: *Paph.* Golden Crest 'Phipps Finest' HCC/AOS, March 2012 and *Paph. gratrixianum* 'Phipps Best' CCM/AOS, March 2015.

Can we count on you to partner with us? Please help us build a Living Museum of Slipper Orchids at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens. If you own an important slipper orchid that you are interested in donating or selling to the Barbara Tisherman Slipper Orchid Collection, or if you would like to contribute to the BTSOC endowment at Phipps, please contact Ben Dunigan, curator of horticulture, at 412-622-6915, ext. 6622 or [bdunigan@phipps.conservatory.org](mailto:bdunigan@phipps.conservatory.org). All contributions are tax deductible.\*

For more information:

Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens

[www.phipps.conservatory.org](http://www.phipps.conservatory.org)

Orchid Society of Western Pennsylvania

[www.oswp.org](http://www.oswp.org)

North American Plant Collections Consortium

[www.publicgardens.org/napcc](http://www.publicgardens.org/napcc)

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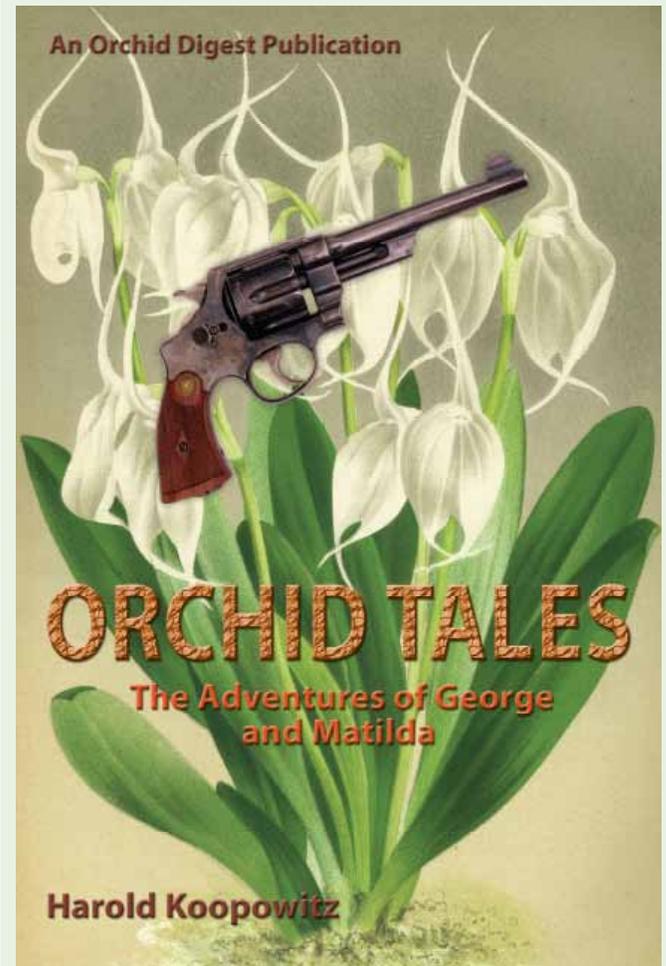
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