



Orchids by the acre

For Bob Fuchs, orchids are not only his business but his life.

AFTER negotiating the backroads of South Dade's rich agricultural Redlands area, first-time visitors are apt to be awed by the Oz-like emergence of Bob Fuchs' six-acre compound on the outskirts of Homestead.

Author of the American Orchid Society's handbook section on Vanda culture, Fuchs is an accredited authority and judge of Vandaceous orchids, ascocendas and ascocendrums. These, his signature species, are warm-growing and floriferous, producing the widest range of color of any orchid type. Vandas come in all sizes and shapes, he notes, and are among the easiest orchids to grow.

A kaleidoscopic flourish of *Orchidaceae* endows the entrance and environs of Fuchs' home with an unmistakable panache. Assorted Vandas cling to mahogany, oak and tapebua trees as well as sabal palms and shrubs, while bushy sheaves of "Miss Joaquin" (an uncommon orchid with pencil-shape leaves) convene in clay pots alongside his sales center and greenhouse. It's not surprising to find on any given day upwards of 100,000 plants at R.F. Fuchs Orchids in various stages from bud to bloom.

What's more astonishing is their profusion in so many decorative roles throughout the Mediterranean-style house of this third-generation collector and cultivator.

The two-story living room he designed in collaboration with Homestead architect Robert Barnes includes a cabinet filled with exquisite porcelain figurines, fine platters and vases created by Boehm, Royal Worcester, Rosenthal, Limoges and Morcroft. But the crowning glory is a rare Fabergé egg with an 18-karat gold-and-ruby crest that opens to disclose — what else? — a sculpted image of a tiny orchid.

Beauty From Disaster

In 1992, Hurricane Andrew devastated R.F. Fuchs Orchids in Redlands, but today you'd never suspect the disaster. Along with his friends and employees, Fuchs rebuilt the nursery so that now it consists of seven greenhouses, plus four surrounding acres under cultivation. Between this site and an adjunct facility that he owns in Thailand, Fuchs sells hundreds of thousands of orchids each year.



Orchidaceae



Nearby frames display antique cigarette cards and equally uncommon labels from tins of potted meat, each identified by some orchid genus. Botanical prints, circa 1775, by Curtis, "the English Audubon," are hung on a neighboring wall. "Items such as these are increasingly difficult to find," says Michael Coronado, acknowledged as Fuchs' "right hand" and confidant as well as the firm's vice president.

Petit-point pillows embroidered with orchids are strewn atop a teak-framed sofa, one of many furnishings that Fuchs has gathered from all over the Far East. For example, his entry surround is secured by a pair of copper Chinese Foo dogs, and an Indian elephant howdah serves as a settee. Ornate hand-carved chests, intricate ivory curios, prayer bells and Buddhas abound, always fascinating and occasionally functional.

A spiral stairway climbs from Fuchs' living room to a loft that served as his library until an expansive family room was added last summer. Tableware with orchid ornamentation is everywhere, as might be expected of a connoisseur of fine fare as well as fine flowers. Even the chandeliers have floral extensions.

Sunlight filters into the new family room through a four-panel window of stained glass he created in concert with Miami artist James Cuba. Six feet wide by eight feet high, it depicts tropical birds and vegetation including, naturally, orchids. Three matching leather sofas arranged conversationally are accented with pillows whose covers combine orchid blossoms with banana leaves.

The focal piece of this cedar-vaulted lair is custom-built cabinetry containing a comprehensive library devoted entirely to orchids, including a half-century of American Orchid Society bulletins. Also in evidence are his countless awards from the East Everglades and the South Florida Orchid Societies, both of which he presided over as president. Most cherished, however, are his International Grand Championship Awards.

Contrasting with the Far Eastern motif elsewhere in the house, this sanctum is engulfed in African artifacts and furnishings, woven-cane chairs from Mozambique, tribal masks, ostrich eggs, and an awesome array of big-game trophies. Mounted heads line the walls, and hides serve as throw rugs. One of Fuchs' brothers, a taxidermist in North Carolina, performed the honors.

"I've been on two shooting safaris, both in preserves," he says, confessing an abiding passion for the sport. "All these were older animals slain in their native

habitat." Fuchs is planning a hunt later this year in Zimbabwe, coinciding with a speaking engagement before a local orchid society.

However, several items here are neither African nor orchid-inspired: a player piano, a slot machine, and a preserved page from an 1800 Ulster County Gazette (a family heirloom) reporting the death of President George Washington.

The nursery operation now consists of seven greenhouses, including a "stud house" for breeding and two more to perpetuate seedlings derived from nature. Others house a spectrum of man-made hybrids. Four adjacent acres are currently under cultivation, augmented by an adjunct nursery in Thailand. Several hundred thousand orchids are sold annually, primarily by mail order or wholesale.

Nearby is a pond constructed of coral rock and lushly landscaped with natural vegetation and tropical foliage. Literally brimming with prodigious Thai catfish and paku paku from the Amazon, it is continuously refreshed from a picturesque waterfall whose source is an underground well. The bottom of a proximate swimming pool features - what else? - a huge Vanda orchid created of mosaic tile.

The surrounding land, originally hammock and pine forest, has been in Fuchs' family since 1921, when his paternal grandfather built the wood house where Bob's father was born. Grandma Fuchs also loved horticulture, and his grandparents grew flowers here, along with vegetables and fruit trees. (The latter, incidentally, included a hybrid avocado that still bears their name.)

As a boy Fuchs sold African violets and searched for isolated orchid specimens. Upon earning his degree from Florida State University in 1970, he opened a nursery initially as a productive and profitable sideline to teaching arts and crafts at Homestead Junior High School. He opted for early retirement in 1985 to devote all his time to his increasingly consuming passion.

Because Florida is not so hospitable to orchids as are the cool, moist slopes of the Andes, excursions through subtropical Central and South America have led to more than one of his premium namesake species. Other treks have taken him to the highlands of Southeast Asia, Africa and Hawaii.

An unforgettable expedition in 1992 found Fuchs and Coronado on Maui when a call from home alerted them to the imminent arrival of Hurricane

Andrew. Following a frantic succession of flights, they returned to South Dade to find three-quarters of their orchids destroyed and the nursery completely demolished.

"All in four and a half hours," Fuchs recalls, "and we were only insured for \$30,000. That was a very humbling experience."

Surprisingly scant damage was done to his house, however, or the "cement fortress" (now a guest room) that replaced his family's wood cabin shattered by a hurricane 47 years earlier. These, and a chickee rebuilt by Miccosukke Indians, sheltered his homeless employees, families and friends who labored to reconstruct the nursery. Royal palms that had toppled domino-like were uprighted wherever possible, as were neighboring oaks. Meanwhile, Fuchs bought up every reasonably intact greenhouse available in the Redlands, and today his business is prospering.

"Life," Fuchs muses, momentarily, digressing from the subject of orchids, "is like a rose. You go up and up a stem, and there are lots of thorns. But when you get to the top — well, the scent is worth the effort." **SE**

ORCHIDS EVERYWHERE

Billed as "the largest annual orchid event in America," the 52nd Miami International Orchid Show is presented next month by the South Florida Orchid Society at the Coconut Grove Convention Center in Miami.

This year's theme, "Orchid Wonders of the World," features Dr. Ted Baker and graduate students from Florida International University's Landscape Architectural Program. The show will offer elaborate exhibits, educational workshops, demonstrations and seminars, sale of rare species, and tours of local orchid farms.

Preview party: Feb. 27, 7:30 p.m.; \$35. Show schedule: Feb. 28 and March 1, 10 a.m. - 8 p.m.; March 2, 10 a.m. - 6 p.m.

Admission: \$9 at door, or \$15 for three-day pass, including educational programs; children 12 or younger admitted free.

For tickets, call 305-255-3656. For travel and tour information, call 800-654-4544.

As a primer, the American Orchid Society offers a 16-page brochure that answers commonly asked questions about orchids (the largest group of flowering plants in nature) and explains how to grow them. For a free copy, call 561-585-8666; fax: 561-585-0654; e-mail: 71726.1741@compuserve.com.