

Orchids take over Bristol Senior Center at spring show

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Erica Drzewiecki | Staff Ecuadorean mother and daughter, Ninra and Dayaneth Portella, visit the Bristol Senior Center during the spring show over the weekend.

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BRISTOL - Admirers and horticulturists gathered in the city over the weekend to celebrate the most biologically diverse flower on our planet.

Thousands of orchids of all colors and varieties filled the Bristol Senior Center Saturday and Sunday, for the Connecticut Orchid Society's Annual Spring Show.

Cultivators from as far away as Ecuador brought their plants to sell and share. The Bristol Senior Center was chosen as this year's show venue because of its accessibility and location.

Garden clubs from New Jersey, New Hampshire, Cape Cod, Massachusetts and White Plains, New York also participated. Ribbons were awarded to the most spectacular blooms, as determined by a panel of judges.

Judy Becker, the society's oldest member, was one of those judges. She's been involved in the club since 1970.

"There are well over 100 classes of orchids," Becker said of her challenge. "If you go to a dog show, you don't see Chihuahuas and boxers in the same class. Orchids are the same way. There are more blooming orchid species than any other type of flowering plant."

There are 26,000 species and counting. At least 35 are native to New England.

"Sometimes it's only one small area with just the right soil and temperature that can sustain that plant and a shopping center is built on top of it," Becker said.

When humans take it upon themselves to grow orchids, they also must create a balanced environment for the plant, whether that's on a windowsill or in a greenhouse.

"Sometimes you're as puzzled by your successes as you are your failures," Becker pointed out. "But why do something easy? A challenge is a lot more fun."

She admitted to being most impressed by plants she had never encountered before or had grown, but not as well.

University of Connecticut Plant Growth Facilities Manager Clinton Morse mulled over the biological questions posed by visitors to his booth at the show. The university has an ongoing relationship with the Connecticut Orchid Society, which provided the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department specimens for its lab.

These were all epiphytes, or plants that attach themselves to others symbiotically - in this case, an artificial tree in a makeshift forest canopy.

"There may be only one species of bee that pollinates a specific orchid species," Morse said. "They are a very interesting flower."

Society President Cheryl Mizak has spent her entire life growing things. It was a gift from her husband that got her into orchids.

"My husband bought me an orchid and I killed it because I didn't know the culture," she remembered Sunday. "That's when I said no plant is going to die on my watch. I had to find out what I did wrong; it was everything. Years later, I'm still learning."

Orchids are like that. They require an exacting patience only a certain variety of growers possess.

Dayaneth Portilla and her mother Ninra shipped 400 orchid plants to Bristol from their home in Ecuador, just for the event. Visitors were excited to find a wealth of miniature varieties at their booth.

"In my country we have different microclimates," Portilla said. "We brought plants from all these different areas to show people the variety."

Mother and daughter doled out advice for new growers and compared notes with other experts, such as Scott Leard.

The self-described "orchi-holic" was anxious to talk orchids with anyone willing.

"I'm enabling other orchi-holics to grow more orchids," said Leard, from Jefferson Station, Long Island.

He estimated there to be around 300 plants on his own property, both indoors and out.

"I've been really serious since the 90s," he said. "I enjoy the flowers. I also like watching them grow."

Society member Sue Kennedy fell into the hobby when her parents - lifelong orchid growers - passed away.

"I inherited a greenhouse filled with orchids," she said. "My parents collected them since the 60s, in Central and South America. When they died I had a choice. I chose to see them go on."

Now the Southbury resident has come to understand her greenhouse as a sort-of haven from the outside world.

"I go in my greenhouse," she said, there's no phones, no people. It's just me and my plants."

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