

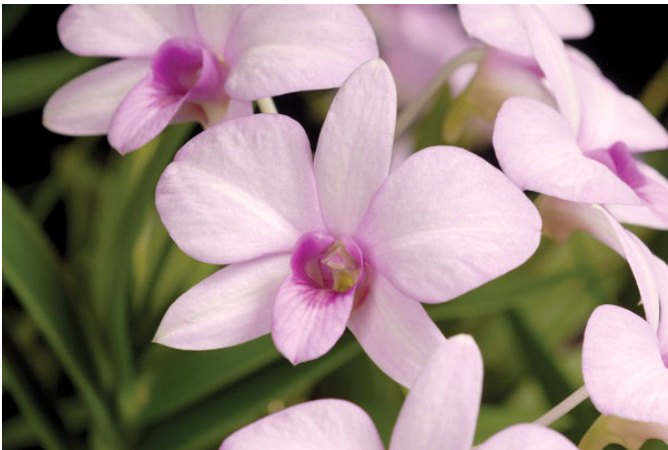
GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Orchid Lady Nurtures a Growing Community

Anne-Marie Hardie



Seagrove, North Carolina, is a potters' haven, boasting over 100 shops within a 20-mile radius. Nestled amid these shops is a colorful surprise—orchid expert Linda Thorne and her lovingly propagated plants. In fact, it was Linda's passion for orchids that motivated the move from Maryland to the unique community of Seagrove.

Her interest in these unique flowering plants began in her early 20s with the purchase of her first orchid.

"I bought myself an orchid and immediately fell in love," said Linda. "Over the years, I would find myself planning

my vacations around the places where I could purchase specific orchids to add to my collection."

Pictured: A Dendrobium bigibbum orchid, one of what Linda Thorne calls her "forever friends."

This keen interest from a young person caught the attention of several experts in the field, including Roger Cole from Arbec Orchids in Maryland.

"Roger became a mentor to me; he introduced me to the American Orchid Society, where he was a judge, and taught me how to grow orchids correctly," said Linda. Over the years, Linda collected close to 200 personal plants, which she housed in a small greenhouse in Maryland, just a short commute from Washington.

"The orchids were my relaxation, my Zen," said Linda. "They were something to take care of after work. I loved them."

Through her involvement with the American Orchid Society, Linda developed from a budding hobbyist into an expert speaker, educator and advocate for orchids. She became a student judge, and then seven years later a full judge, presenting her with the opportunity to learn and evaluate orchids firsthand.

"Being involved in the American orchid society is so much fun. You don't even realize the extent of what you were going through," said Linda. "The time passes so quickly because you are doing something that you love."

Her dedication in the field of orchids resulted in her becoming a trustee, part of the governing body of the organization, where she took part in the decisions on the society's investments, including conversations on projects, providing scholarships to students and grants for research projects.

During this time, Linda met a retired chemist, Charles Williamson, who taught her how to clone orchids, propagating the plants from seeds.

"Orchid seeds don't have a food source of their own; they have to be planted in a nutrient-rich bed to prosper," said Linda. She delved into nurturing these babies into the species that they would become—a process that could take up to seven years to see the initial flower.

As she delved even further into her orchid education, Linda recognized that her passion had become much more than a hobby. With the knowledge on how to propagate her own orchids in hand and 200 bottles of baby orchids, Linda felt confident that she had the tools, technology and education to start an orchid business of her own.

Although she loved Maryland, Linda wanted to move closer to her parents, who were in North Carolina. It was Linda's father who encouraged the move to Seagrove, just a short distance from their home.

"Seagrove is extremely historical; a walking town whose claim to fame is that it's the pottery capital in the United States. It seemed like the perfect place to start an orchid nursery," said Linda. "I became 'the orchid lady.'"

During that first year, Linda built a 28-ft. by 100-ft. hoophouse, essentially a gothic style, free-standing greenhouse that was covered in double poly with inflator fans. The greenhouse was heated to 64F (18C) during the wintertime, providing the ideal climate for the orchids. It was the perfect setting and fit for this potter community. In fact, in only a few years, Seagrove Orchids had to expand to house Linda's personal plants, while also providing the opportunity for Linda to explore new varieties. The second greenhouse is maintained at a slightly cooler temperature, 58F (14C), providing space for varieties that prefer a cooler climate.

However, the retail climate in the region shifted with the expansion of box stores, grocery and other retail locations and it increased the overall accessibility of orchids. Unfortunately, this reduced the overall traffic to Seagrove Orchids. In response, Linda made the decision to shift the business to a weekend-only operation.

Today, Seagrove Orchids has become a unique venue for hobbyist and new growers alike to explore the world of orchids, with close to 100 species under one roof. Customers benefit not only from a larger selection of plants, but also Linda's expertise.

"We have an Orchid 101 class where I tell visitors all about myself and how to grow the orchids," she said. "A lot of the times, the orchids sell themselves, they are just so beautiful."

Linda strives to debunk the myth that orchids are difficult to grow by providing both the education and varieties that will enable the purchaser to enjoy the plant for years to come. Seagrove Orchids is truly the one-stop-shop for orchid lovers, providing an entrancing display of orchid species, supplies and education. This includes custom-made pottery from the local potters and a variety of mediums. In fact, Linda will even make a medium on the spot for those customers that tend to overwater. Her hope is that customers will come in, entranced by the mystery and exoticness of the orchid, but leave with the tools and confidence to care for their new plant.

"People come here because they are looking for something that they can't find in the grocery store," said Linda.

Recently, Linda made the challenging decision to step back from her orchid nursery full time and pursue an education in nursing. The purchase environment for orchids has changed since 2000, when Linda first started her venture. Although, there has been a decline in traffic, Linda firmly believes that there's a need for spaces, like Seagrove Orchids, to continue to provide the education and tools to consumers.

"Nursing fills a niche in my life that I was missing, I work at a wound care clinic where I can nurture the same patients week after week until they get better," she said. "When I get home from work, I go out to the greenhouse and care for my orchid babies. It's the perfect mix." **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.