

GROWERTALKS

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Prize-Winning Orchids from the Inside Out

William Bremer

This article was submitted by the experts at Vitamin Institute.

"Most people think that growing orchids is very difficult, something that takes some kind of secret knowledge, but not so," says prize-winning orchid grower Norman Mizuno with a smile that makes it all sound very easy. "That's probably because there's so much misinformation being given out by so-called 'experts' on television shows and in books."

Mizuno should know, because he learned the hard way – by dint of years of research and hard work growing orchids in city apartments and basements under artificial lighting. Celebrating his fiftieth year devoted to the cultivation of the prized tropical flower, he became intrigued by the beautiful plants as a young child. With his partner Alan Davidson, Mizuno is now co-owner of Ha'iku Maui Orchids, a company with a 16,000-square-foot greenhouse located on the windward slope of Maui's Mt. Haleakala. Ha'iku Maui Orchids specializes in orchids that are easy to grow and bloom in the home, as well as the more exotic flowers popular with collectors.

Together Mizuno and Davidson have earned more than 50 American Orchid Society Awards, including eight prestigious Certificate of Merit awards awarded to plants deemed outstanding in both growth and flowering. In addition, both Mizuno and Davidson have each earned the rare distinction of having entirely new orchid genera named for them by the Royal Horticultural Society of England – named "Mizunoara" and "Davidsonara" – due to their success at developing new hybrids of the popular bloom.

"When you hybridize new flowers," he notes, "What's really important is that: one, it looks pretty, two, it blooms easily, and, three, that it grows well."

Mizuno's first contact with orchids came as a result of the fact that his parents were given an orchid plant as a wedding present. He was immediately fascinated by the beautiful flower, and decided to learn everything he could

about it. As a result, by the age of eight, he began spending most of his Saturday afternoons in the neighborhood nurseries of his native Pearl City, Hawaii.

‘I was very lucky that several growers let me observe them for hours on end and never hesitated to answer my many questions,’ he recalls fondly. ‘As I learned more about orchids, my determination to grow them myself only became stronger.’

While studying at the University of Hawaii, where he eventually earned several degrees, including a Bachelor of Science in horticulture, Mizuno took a trip to see New York City. It was not long after graduation that he decided to move to the Big Apple.

There Mizuno took up the challenge of growing orchids indoors, under artificial lights, a technique that has traditionally not been taken that seriously by orchid enthusiasts, who believed that indoor conditions would never be suitable for prize winners.

But no one counted on the fact that Mizuno would take a scientific approach to the practice, painstakingly testing a variety of conditions as well as plant nutrients and soil conditioners.

It came as somewhat of a surprise, then, to the orchid-growing community of the New York area when one of Mizuno’s plants was the first indoor orchid to receive the Mayor’s Trophy in an annual competition sponsored by the Greater New York Orchid Society. His winning the same award for the second time a few years later only reinforced the fact that serious orchid competitors could no longer dismiss those who grew their plants indoors.

Are there any secrets that Mizuno has discovered in his decades of orchid growing that have helped him earn his way to more than 30 American Orchid Society awards around the country? His answer begins with a slow smile.

‘Some time ago, a friend recommended a plant nutrient called SUPERthrive,’ he says. ‘I tested it and found that where I used it the flowers were larger, with deeper color, the leaves were healthier and the plants lasted longer. I’ve been using it for 30 years.’

It’s clear that Mizuno doesn’t believe in any magic bullets in terms of feeding his orchid plants – he still performs tests on every new product he finds – but it’s also clear that when he finds a useful product, he doesn’t hide it, either.

‘I recommend SUPERthrive in all the classes I teach and at all the shows I attend,’ he says. ‘It works under any conditions and it helps recondition the plant.’

A few years ago prices fell drastically on roses, and when Mizuno heard of a family-owned rose farm in Ecuador that was struggling to survive, he didn’t hesitate to contact the owners, who were scrambling to salvage their livelihood.

‘I told them the only way to survive was to grow bigger, better roses. That way they could charge a bit more for a better product,’ recalls Mizuno. ‘By this time, they were desperate and were willing to try anything, so I sent them

some SUPERthrive, which was not yet available in their area. They tried it and the bigger, hardier flowers saved their business.”

Interestingly, SUPERthrive was developed by someone who early on in his own life dedicated himself to finding ways of improving the health of living things.

At the age of 16, while raising his Welsh terrier puppy, Dr. John Thomson, now ninety-four years old, became interested in nutrient supplements. Eventually earning a Ph.D. in biochemistry and nutrition, as well as a Doctor of Arts in biochemistry and horticulture, Thomson’s most notable achievement has been the development of SUPERthrive, a concentrated formula for plants that contains 50 vitamins and hormones. Unveiled in 1939, SUPERthrive was an immediate sensation in the world of horticulture and for his efforts Dr. Thomson received the only Science and Industry Gold Medal awarded at the Golden Gate International Exposition, the official World’s Fair of 1940.

Still active in his chosen field at the age of 95, Dr. Thomson has most recently been honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Lawn & Garden Marketing and Distribution Association (LGMDA).

According to Thomson, SUPERthrive supplies the vitamins and hormones that act as “triggers” for many plant processes, the essential nutrients that plants would otherwise have to make for themselves. It results in higher quality plants with a speedier growth cycle.

Today, Mizuno and Davidson can often be found working in their own in-house orchid laboratory where the company continues to propagate its own species and hybrids.

Mizuno still grows his orchids under much shadier conditions than is generally recommended. Experience has taught him that this prepares the plants to adjust to indoor growing conditions more readily. And he’s still amassing awards, including the American Orchid Society Show Trophy for the Most Outstanding Orchid Exhibit at the Maui County Fair in 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002.

Among their other major awards are the 2004 Cincinnati Flower Show Gold Award, the 2004 Pennsylvania Horticultural Society Award, the 2005 Pacific Orchid Exposition award for Best Commercial Display, and the 2006 Honolulu Orchid Society’s 67th Annual Show award for Best Guest Display.

“We’ve won so many awards that one of my friends said that I was cheating because I used SUPERthrive,” laughs Mizuno. “I told him that it would be cheating only if SUPERthrive wasn’t available to everybody, but it is.”

William Bremer is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles and can be reached at wrbremer@sbcglobal.net.

For more information, write to Vitamin Institute at 12610 Saticoy Street South, North Hollywood, CA 91605 or call 800 -441-VITA (8482), FAX at 818-766-VITA (8482) or visit the web site at www.superthrive.com