

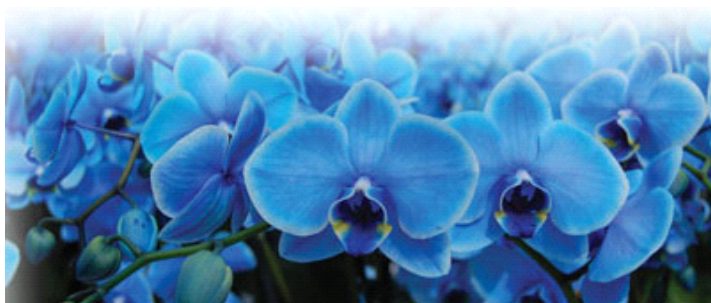
# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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### A Blue Orchid? What's Next?

*Joli A. Hohenstein*



Meet the minds behind Blue Mystique: Andrew and Ilma Bartha, owners of Silver Vase. The husband-and-wife team produces more than 2 million orchids and bromeliads a year from their Homestead, Florida, headquarters.

Fully robotized and environmentally friendly—they long ago made IPM a priority with their branded Clean & Green program—Silver Vase's glass and double-poly greenhouses span nearly 1 million sq. ft.

Starting in 1988 with a tiny shade house, the operation was at 400,000 units by 1997. By 2008 they were producing 1.5 million orchids and 500,000 bromeliads, plus debuting dozens of exclusive new European orchid varieties each year.

"We are, of course, pleased to experience growth like this, but our focus has always remained on bringing both our customers and consumers quality plants, often in varieties they've never seen before," says Andrew. In 2011 came the big one: the world's first blue *Phalaenopsis* orchid, Blue Mystique. But this is no one-shot wonder. Andrew's a plantsman with 30 years in the business and a keen eye for what grows and what sells.

#### **Who you know**

Andrew has always known finding the right partner is a key to success. After all, he started out right from the beginning, when he married Ilma.

A horticulturist not by trade but by passion, she came to the industry through her husband, who eventually convinced her to make the ultimate commitment: start a greenhouse business. In Florida. In the '80s.

"Those first years, we worked 11 hours a day, for six days a week, mixing soil with a big shovel, under the sun, all sticky with a mixture of sunblock, sweat and Off, being constantly bitten by fire ants," says Ilma. The couple's honeymoon was spent building benches for their shade houses—then totaling a mere 5,000 sq. ft. Ah, the good times.

“All that hard work together laid a great foundation for the business and taught us the value of working with the right people,” Andrew says. He’s kept that philosophy throughout the business’ history.

Eighteen years ago he set out to find the world’s best quality phalaenopsis orchids with a vision of bringing European varieties to the States. He found Floricultura, a Dutch family-run business with nearly 80 years in the industry who helped introduce phalaenopsis orchids as pot plants. Nearly two decades into their relationship, Silver Vase is the breeder’s largest partner.

That collaboration has helped Silver Vase extend its selection to more than 200 varieties. They average 30 to 40 new varieties of orchids weekly and carry around a dozen bromeliads at any given time. It’s about an 80/20 split that adds up to growth.

More recently when that growth expanded business beyond their own expectations, Silver Vase contracted with nearby producer Magic Tropicals to use their Apopka, Florida, facility.

“With this we can seamlessly adjust and shift production as needed, and further ensure our customers constant, reliable supply of quality plants,” says Andrew.

Flowering, packing and shipping varieties in the adjunct space lets Silver Vase supply at least 10,000 more plants a week, including their new line of Tea Cup miniature orchids. Plus, it gives customers the additional option of picking up product to save money, and a more centralized location to reduce shipping costs.

### **They’ve been around**

So you say the first time you’ve heard of Silver Vase was when the blue orchid came out? Even if you don’t know their name, you’re likely familiar with what they’ve been doing.

Like bringing the U.S. year-round phalaenopsis availability. They experimented with climate control and environmental management of their greenhouses until they found the exact ideal conditions to force-flower their orchids. Before that, availability of phals was limited to just the first three months of the year.

Next came transparent pots. Orchids love to have their roots in the air, so Andrew surmised that must mean they want light. (After all, in the wild they grow high on trees with their roots long and free.) It was an assumption that proved right, and his orchids thrived.

Other developments followed: orchids in 5-in. pots instead of the standard 6-in., heart-shaped orchids and, of course, the blue orchid.

The industry took notice, and their clientele expanded to retailers, interiorscapers, florists and wholesalers receiving products packaged in a streamlined 54,000-sq. ft. shipping facility and starting in 2004, delivered via the Barthas’ own distribution network.

### **Blue notes**

On one of Andrew’s many new variety pilgrimages, something caught his eye: an orchid so blue he went right to it in the test greenhouse. Many more trips, more rounds of testing, and years of experimentation followed

before the industry got its first peek at what would become Blue Mystique.

Now that it's out, one question looms: How does it get its blue? Well, that's a closely guarded secret. In fact, ask too many questions, and Andrew clams up like, well, a clam. Turns out he's bound by high-level confidentiality rules—he can't even say who came up with it.

What he will say is that Blue Mystique is made through an exclusive patented technology that transforms white orchids to electric blue. It's not hybridized. The technique actually infuses plants with the color from the inside out. As its inventors are ever-environmentally conscious, it uses naturally derived elements to do so.

All this lets Silver Vase ship blue orchids in a range of ethereal blue. "One consumer compared it to the blue water around Hawaii," Andrew says. "Others have called it 'slightly lavender' and 'indigo.'"

Buds on the current stem bring more blue flowers in varying lighter shades of blue. A new stem will probably bring white flowers, says Andrew, though it's too early to know for sure. (In other words, the technology's just too new.)

What they do know is this thing is marketable, and they admit the level of interest has even surprised them.

"We're hearing reports of retailers planning Easter, Mother's Day and 'It's a boy' promotions," says Ilma, "and others who've sold more than 100 plants before noon from a single display." **GT**

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