

Orchids Galore: gifts, containers, plant food and vanilla symposium update



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TROPICAL TOPICS

COMING UP THIS WEEK:

- Mother's Day Orchids
- Two Orchid Containers
- Tom's Orchid-Growing Secret
- You Know Who Needs Kelp?
- Florida Vanilla Symposium

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Mother's Day Orchids

I asked Google to list the top gift plants for the Mother's Day holiday, and it put orchids in the top six. Its generative reasoning was that orchids "represent love, beauty and strength, making them a thoughtful, long-lasting, and elegant gift."

Westerlay Orchids is on the task. They have two new orchid designs for this upcoming Mother's Day.

Let's start with the 5-in. Pirouette design (on the left). Its look is elegant yet strong, just like a mother. The sculptural, graceful swirl design was inspired by movement and light. Artistic yet modern, all in a lovely and long-lasting phalaenopsis.



The second design, the one on the right, is one I think is super cool. The 5-in. Mother & Child design has a smaller orchid somehow attached to it. As Westerlay puts it, it is a "symbolic arrangement that celebrates the bond between generations." This "you get one and I get one" gift is a great way to get kids interested in caring for orchids for the first time. This would also make

a touching Grandma's Day gift.



Two Orchid Containers (and a Bonus)

Thumbing through my notes and scrolling through my photos I found a couple of orchid-related items from the Tropical Plant International Expo (TPIE).

The first two are from [Big Grass](#). I really liked the Orchid Planter Bowl with holes. It offers plenty of drainage and airflow while still keeping the media contained. And since all of Big Grass' products are made by hand, no two bowls have the exact same hole arrangement.



The second from Big Grass is the Tapered Slot Planter. This is more of the traditional type of orchid planter, but with the slots going vertically and not horizontally. Plus both (this one and the one above) are terra cotta, which some folks have an affinity to. I would use it in the kitchen to rinse off my berries, too.



And while I am on the topic of Big Grass, I may as well tell you about their Mesa planters. The Mesa Tower and the Mesa Plateau were inspired by the amazing rock formations in Utah. Yes, these are formed from a mold but I am told each has finished detail work, making each one unique. And I love how appropriate they are for succulents.



NEW FOR 2026

My Brother-In-Law's Orchid-Growing Secret

Okay, maybe it's not a secret, but it's something I am not doing for my orchids. But now that I've seen the following product, maybe I will.

My brother-in-law grows beautiful orchids at home. Just gorgeous. Sure, he has plenty of good light. But he also swears by using liquid kelp several times a year. As I was scrolling through my TPIE photos, I came across a new plant food company that sells, among other products, liquid kelp.

The company is Grow Queen and they have two products that are kelp-based. First is their 5-5-5 Liquid Plant Food with 25% kelp—*Ecklonia maxima* sea kelp from South Africa—to be specific. The other is straight-up 100% Liquid Sea Kelp. They mentioned that this particular sea kelp is great for building resilience and stress tolerance, as well as expanding root zones, and is helpful for struggling plants in general.



They also have a bunch of different planting mixes, including a few that are specifically for houseplants. Check out their [WEBSITE](#) for more.

You Know Who Needs Kelp?

Katy Moss Warner, former Director of Horticulture at Walt Disney World may benefit from a little kelp to help her grow orchids. I interviewed Katy along with dear friend and former Florida Nursery, Growers, and Landscape Association COO Linda Adams for my podcast, I Dig Your Story, and in the episode she revealed that she struggles most with growing these beautiful flowers.



But more importantly, during the episode Katy and Linda talk about their involvement with the [Bloom & Grow Garden Society](#) based in Winter Garden, Florida. The club is doing some amazing work to plant trees, beautify Winter Garden, and offer their members some interesting tours of Florida nurseries and gardens. And honestly, they admit that Bloom & Grow benefits immensely from the horticulture professionals who get involved and support their causes.

Linda and Katy do a lot of name dropping of Florida nursery folks during the episode. Are you among those mentioned? Listen for yourself on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#), [Amazon Music](#) and [iHeart Podcasts](#).



Florida Vanilla Symposium Update

Seeing an orchid theme developing for this week's edition of *Tropical Topics*, I reach out to Stephanie Webb, CEO of [Sunshine State Vanilla](#) and the founder of the [American Vanilla Association](#). I recalled that the Florida Vanilla Symposium had taken place earlier this month and I asked for an update.



Vanilla beans from Erica Kursman, grown right in Florida!

"Yes, we just finished the Florida Vanilla Symposium last week. It was a huge success! We had guests come from Costa Rica, Hawaii and South America but primarily growers from the Lee and Collier County areas to learn about our current vanilla research and growing tips. We doubled in size from last year's event!"

I had the good fortune to look over the slides used by the symposium's presenters, and believe me, it was not all about ice cream and baked goods. What other topics were there? Plant breeder and geneticist Xingbo Wu of University of Florida's Tropical Research and Education Center gave a vanilla research update (a sample slide from Xingbo is below) ...

The mystery of vanilla

- Tropical vine plants belong to Orchidaceae family;
- The *Vanilla* genus contains at least 121 accepted species;
- It is widely distributed throughout the tropical and subtropical regions of all continents except Australia;
- Florida has four native vanilla species;
- The most popular vanilla flavor originates from the natural extracts of fruit capsules from three major vanilla species (*V. planifolia*, *V. x tahitensis* and *V. pompona*);
- New aromatic vanilla species are constantly being reported, offering more potential for new flavor profiles!



Dr. Kelly Ablard gave a presentation about *Vanilla planifolia*, “The Fragility of a Medicinal and Aromatic Plant at the Crossroads of Conservation and Cultivation;” and Maria del Pilar Galeas, a PhD Student in Food Science at Rutgers University presented, “*Vanilla pompona* Schiede in the U.S. Prior to 1958: A Storied Past, Emerging Opportunities.”

The story arc here is that research continues to be conducted in this largely monoculture crop, with the dominant global cultivated species being *Vanilla planifolia*, but it is at risk on multiple fronts (climate, pests, diseases, etc.) and perhaps new species such as *V. pompona* and others can present opportunities for the future.

I love this kind of stuff! Plus, also ice cream.



Stephanie with symposium speaker Dr. Kelly Ablard.

Stephanie founded the American Vanilla Association to help support local vanilla growers in any way they need, and is hoping to start quarterly Zoom meetings for that purpose. She is also available to give talks about growing vanilla both commercially and to garden clubs.

If you have any comments, questions or suggestions for content, email me about them at ewells@ballpublishing.com.

Ellen

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