

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Shedding Light on Indoor Orchid Growing

Anne-Marie Hardie



It may look like a typical warehouse, but inside the doors of High Desert Orchids in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is 2,000 sq. ft. of beautiful blooming orchids. The plants are all grown under artificial lighting and a regular misting schedule to protect them from the dry, unrelenting heat and hot sun of New Mexico. Owner Kelly McCracken is quickly making a name for herself as she passionately instructs home growers on converting small spaces into an orchid oasis.

“I’ve always had this nibbling attraction to flowers,” said Kelly. “But I specifically remember being on a family vacation when I was a kid and seeing this big orchid in a shop window, and I was amazed. And my mother stood next to me and said, ‘Those are impossible to grow.’”

Pictured: Kelly McCracken, founder and owner of High Desert Orchids in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with one of her prized plants.

A few years later, her mother was successful at getting her orchids to reflower, which prompted Kelly to try it herself. However, it wasn’t until a chance visit to a local orchid guild show that fully introduced Kelly to the diversity in this plant species.

“I bought a ton of plants,” said Kelly. She became an orchid hobbyist, filling her dorm rooms and small spaces with a range of orchids, but it was the move to her home in Albuquerque that elevated her hobby.

“I finally had all of this space, so I just started to buy a bunch of plants I really liked,” said Kelly. “Finally, my husband got tired of the plants in the house and so he built a greenhouse in my backyard.”

She shared that her husband Stephen joked it would be nice if she were able to find a source of income from the plants to help pay off the greenhouse. Kelly took that comment to heart, registered a business (calling it High Desert Orchids) and began sharing her passion for orchids with others. The small space of the greenhouse served primarily as a buy-and-sell operation, allowing Kelly to bring in her favorite plants and share them with her growing community.

Facebook Marketplace and Facebook Live became valuable tools, providing Kelly with the ability to engage with customers without having them walk through the working nursery. It also expanded the market beyond her local

community, as all sales were made online and then shipped to the customer.

She used the COVID-19 shutdown in March to begin contemplating the next phase of High Desert Orchids, seeking a solution that would offer a larger space while helping address environmental challenges.

“We wanted to diversify our inventory and offer better plants to the customers,” said Kelly. This included sourcing plants from overseas to deliver different plants than their competitors and alleviating their reliance on Hawaii-grown species. One of the challenges with the New Mexico climate is that it isn’t really favorable to growing orchids, with rainfall in the single digits and humidity in the low teens.



Pictured: In July 2020, High Desert Orchids invested in a commercial warehouse to better control the growing environment during production of its orchids, keeping them out of the New Mexico sun and heat.

The most practical solution was to source a closed warehouse, as it would eliminate the sunlight and heat challenges that occurred in the greenhouse while also allowing High Desert Orchids to fully control the environment.

“The cost to humidify and ventilate a large area would have been too much,” said Kelly. “So we decided to forego the natural light and grow in a sealed building.”

On July 15, 2020, just two years after registering the business, High Desert Orchids invested in a commercial warehouse. The pandemic and quieter business opportunity helped make this coveted space—which typically would have been in high demand—available.

Stephen’s engineering experience helped create the ideal grow environment, including sourcing the systems that would best respond to the needs of the plants. This includes installing 240 plugs and investing in a high-pressure misting system.

“He’s been helpful in designing the facility. I’m really more of the plant manager; I just tell him what I need, and the conditions for the plant, and he makes it happen,” said Kelly.

With a year of growth in controlled environment under her belt, she confidently stated that the biggest misconception is the expense. In fact, the biggest electrical bill to date is the air conditioner in the office portion of the building.

Growing orchids in a warehouse helped to connect High Desert Orchids with the niche market of small indoor orchid growers, most of whom grow their plants under artificial lighting.

“The lights allow you to have a greater grow space without being dependent on windowsills for sunlight,” said Kelly. “It also provides better environmental controls, as you can limit the humidified area to that portion of your home.”

Although High Desert Orchids doesn’t currently sell the orchid light setup, Kelly is helping to educate the orchid community on this niche growing technique.

“It’s tough to find information, so I try and make myself a resource to my customers about growing under artificial lights,” said Kelly. This includes a series of lighting articles explaining the science behind artificial lighting and how to optimize the grow space, which will be featured in Orchids magazine, published by the American Orchid Society.

The majority of High Desert Orchids’ sales continues to be online, with the company shipping 95% of their plants out

of state. However, the business model has evolved beyond Facebook Live, which can be extremely time intensive, to a website. Having a site allows High Desert Orchids to showcase both the new plants and educational resources for both current and future customers.

“It’s a little bit of a challenge to get eyeballs off social media onto a website, but a year later and the sales have become fairly steady,” said Kelly.

The plans for the future include expanding beyond orchids to include other species in the houseplant market and continuing to respond to the growing demand. **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.