



MAKING A SCENE

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By Pete Mihalek

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For brown thumbs and new homeowners, orchids can give off an intimidating vibe. To them, their delicate and exotic stature might be more suitable under glass at the art museum, than surviving in their home.

Improved orchid education, merchandising and new varieties have given consumers a reason to feel comfortable around these eye-catching houseplants — not to mention, a reason to buy.

Knowledge is Power

Assistant houseplant buyer Jason Dennis of Oregon's Portland Nursery tends to agree that orchids get slapped with the unfair misnomers of being difficult and demanding. This can deter many consumers in search of a new houseplant, and if you are a retailer that sells orchids, this is something you should be well aware of.

"We try to educate them to know that orchids actually take very little care, and as long as the environment is correct, and we've driven them away from overwatering, orchids can thrive indoors," Dennis says.

In merchandising, Dennis mixes some orchids in with other houseplant displays, but he notes orchids aren't meant to be hidden. The majority of Portland Nursery's orchid selection is grouped together with orchid pots and orchid bark near the entrances to the greenhouses to grab attention.

Feedback? Just Press Play

Speaking of grabbing your customer's attention with orchids, Mahoney's

Garden Center did just that with its first annual orchid and houseplant festival called, "Oh, Orchids!" This Massachusetts garden center held the event for two weeks in February at three of its locations.

"With very little expectation, the event went really well," says Paul Waxman, Mahoney's director of marketing. "This was a wing and a prayer. We knew that another garden center out in the Detroit area (English Gardens) had a lot of success with this type of event. We took note of how and when they did it, which in turn gave us the confidence to do it."

The "Oh, Orchids!" event began on Valentine's Day weekend and carried through until the end of February. Mahoney's staff set up orchid displays, brought in a large and varied inventory of orchids, and also a large inventory of flowering houseplants.

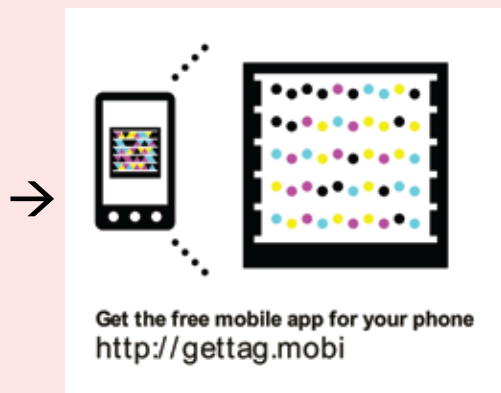
Waxman says, "We did a good job of creating a wow factor when customers first walked in. We really put a lot of effort into creating an exhibit-like feel, with pedestals, extra lights and original displays."

New displays and banners were produced, along with new signs to address frequently asked questions, provide inspiration, explain the history of orchids and share care tips. And without running any ads, the garden center used cost-effective marketing (local press, social media, e-newsletters, instore signage and website marketing) to promote "Oh, Orchid!"

"The timing was right," Waxman says. "February is orchid month, so we timed it with that and also, most importantly, we timed it with the beginning of Valentine's Day weekend. We knew at the very least we'd have that customer crowd come in for Valentine's flowers without even knowing we had orchid fest, but when they come in they'd be surrounded by it." Waxman also credits the event's popularity to the East Coast's tough winter — "People were desperate for something colorful in a warm greenhouse."

Have a smartphone? The team at Mahoney's Garden Center asked its customers what they thought of the new 'Blue Mystique' orchid at the garden center's first annual orchid and houseplant festival called "Oh, Orchid!"

Scan the tag to see video of Mahoney's customers sharing their opinion of the blue orchid. One lucky commenter won an orchid a month.





ACROSS-THE-POND ORCHIDS

"The competition for consumer attention is tough in this category but ignoring [orchids] is giving away business," says Keith Turbett, vice president of Scheurich USA. Turbett recalls a few memorable orchid displays at garden centers while traveling in Europe.



At Sunflower Garden Centre in Frankfurt, Germany, orchids are a key attraction people now travel for miles to shop there. See the ready-to-go gift factor with pot combinations, use of quality display units, height and space for product.



The perfect mix of product choice and emotion in a compact space can be found at Ransoms Garden Centre, Jersey, United Kingdom. Staff can re-stock the display easily and consumers most importantly can shop it on their own. Ransoms has a ratio of one pot sold for four plants. The North American average is one pot for every 12 plants. Just think of the dollar potential with a better ratio.



In Lyon, France, Botanic's theme is nature and their displays are more organic than the others. They have combined a good choice of plants and pots, and signal clearly to the consumer that they should buy. This display is the first thing you see when you walk in. This photo was taken just before Mother's Day 2010.

Another standout from the event came with the introduction of the new blue orchid 'Blue Mystique' from Silver Vase. "We had a great deal of mixed feedback on it," he says. "When we were on the floor talking to customers about the blue orchid, we noticed it was a really easy conversation starter. And very quickly we realized that everyone had a strong opinion, so we ran upstairs, grabbed our video camera and asked them to be on our video blog."

Mahoney's posted the video on its blog, Facebook page and e-mail list. "We asked them to watch the video and told them if they comment they would have a chance to win an orchid a month for the rest of the year." Once the video went viral, Mahoney's received 360 comments and increased their Facebook fans by nearly 200.

With plans to stock more orchid pots and orchid experts for seminars, "Oh, Orchid!" has earned its place on Mahoney's event calendar for next year, and Waxman is also considering to have the same video blog approach this spring with Ball Horticultural's new 'Black Velvet' petunia.

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