

fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

The cymbidium market is booming—which means more choices than ever before.

CAN A FLOWER be a victim of its own success? Like some other orchids, cymbidiums have exploded in popularity and availability over the past two decades. And no wonder. Compare cymbidiums with phalaenopsis, the other orchid that has gone from “rare and exotic” to “everywhere you look.” Cymbidiums take quite a bit longer to grow than phales—three years versus 18 months—which accounts for why a cymbidium may be a bit more expensive.

It also explains why the cymbidium plant—and likewise its sturdy cut stem, covered in waxy blooms—is even longer lasting than a phale. Plus, cyms may bear two or three flowering stems with as many as 18 or more blooms apiece, while phales generally have only one or two flowering stems, typically with fewer blooms. Cyms also come in a wider range of colors than phales.

The downside, of course, is that as both cyms and phales have grown in popularity, the market has been flooded with lower-quality product. When most orchid buyers were hobbyists who wanted cymbidium plants that they could divide and keep forever, plants that would bloom again year after year, the market was dominated by a very few, quality-conscious growers (and really by one, the vener-



Cymbidium <i>Cymbidium spp.</i>
Vase life 10 to 14 days
Availability year-round, but seasonal by specific variety
Bunch size individual blossom or spikes of 7-18 blossoms



Hawaii is one source for high-quality cymbidium orchids in all but the late summer months and early fall (individual varieties may have a more limited seasonal availability.) Hawaiian cyms come in the full range of colors from pure white and pale pink to vivid green and fiery orange. Examples include, clockwise from top left, Mallana ‘Caroline Hargraves’; Nandi ‘Green Giant’; Pia Borg ‘Flash’; California Yellow; and Mighty Sunset ‘Barbara’. These photos are from *Neotropica*—the useful and stylish guide to tropical flowers and plants from Hawaii published by Design358. The guide, authored by Hitomi Gilliam AIFD and Lois Hiranaga AIFD, offers both product information and design inspiration. For more information, visit www.design358.com.

able Gallup & Stribling). Today many more cymbidiums are grown as “disposable” plants, with correspondingly lower standards for cut-flower production as well. These lower-quality, lower-cost cymys easily find buyers. Any disappointments in performance often don’t show up until after the retail sale is made—at which point, the customer may decide that cymbidiums aren’t as good a value as they were cracked up to be.

On the other hand, the market has now matured to the point where some of today’s cymbidium growers are innovating at the same time they maintain high-quality standards. New fashion colors and compact tabletop plants in six-inch pots are among the latest novelties.

While plants can’t be imported, cut cymbidiums are now coming in from New Zealand and South America as well as from the Netherlands, allowing for year-round availability of this winter-blooming flower. Popular in the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s, cymbidiums combine the nostalgic appeal of a classic luxury flower with a new range of fashion-forward hues, from creamy-white, lime green, and burnt orange to pastel shades of pink, lavender, and peach; many of these sport contrasting throat colors of burgundy, green or brown. Mini cymbidiums—about one half the size of the standard three- to four-inch cymbidium blossom—are suitable for more conservative corsages or boutonnieres,



At Westerlay, plants change pot sizes several times over the course of the three years or so it takes them to reach the blooming stage. “See all these nice fat roots pushing up against the side of the pot?” says Toine. “We like to see that before we go up to the next size.”



“I don’t know of a better place to grow orchids,” says Toine Overgaag of Westerlay Orchids in Carpinteria. Cool winters with abundant light have made coastal Southern California a world leader in cymbidium production. Westerlay focuses on potted cymbidiums; most of those you see in this photo are almost, but not quite yet ready to ship out. “Supermarket customers like to see as much color as possible, so, nearly all the flowers open,” says Toine. “Florists usually have a more sophisticated customer who can be educated that just a couple of open blooms is best.”

while the spikes of mini cymys, with 10 to 15 flowers, work well in upscale designs of all sizes.

Checking for quality

What do you look for when you open a box of cut cymbidiums? Check for translucent spots or dried patches on the blooms—a sign of chilling injury or ethylene damage. Cymbidiums are also vulnerable to mechanical damage—precisely because a really fresh cym is so firm, so full of turgor pressure from the water inside its flesh, that if it’s bumped it can easily snap rather than give.

“A lot of growers, especially when they’re packing cut cymbidiums to ship long distance, let the flower lose a little of its moisture first so it gets a little softer, which is actually not a bad thing,” says Toine Overgaag, president of Westerlay Orchids, a cymbidium grower in Carpinteria, California. “Getting softer makes the orchid more resilient in shipping, and then when it arrives you recut and rehydrate it and it gets its vigor back.”

The first rule for buying quality, of course, is to buy from reputable suppliers. Just down the road from Westerlay is Gallup & Stribling, in

business for over 50 years and a leader not only in production but in breeding and propagation. It’s not by chance that these and other cymbidium growers are located in the same small area of coastal Southern California.

“I don’t know of a better place in the world to grow cymys,” says Toine. “We have cool winters, but not really cold, with a lot of light, which is the really important thing.” Although cymbidiums are native to tropical and subtropical Asia, the large-flowered species from which today’s commercial hybrids are derived grow at high altitudes, so the combination of abundant light and cool winter temperatures is key.

A point of pride for Gallup & Stribling is that their plants are “naturally cool-grown”; the growth is never accelerated with heat. “It takes longer, but it means that the mature plant is much harder—and that applies to cut flowers also,” explains Gallup & Stribling operating manager Nancy Welty.

Another growing practice that makes a big difference to quality: Some cymbidium growers keep their plants on an even, constant drip. Gallup & Stribling waters them less frequently, but keeps them in a medium that retains water well, and makes sure the plants are well hy-



Award-winning 'Kiwi Midnight', grown by Gallup & Stribling, offers a nice example of a characteristic that's currently considered a novelty in the market for potted cymbidiums: spikes that hang down rather than standing straight up.

drated when they leave the farm. That way, if they experience periods of dryness in the wholesale or retail environment, or in the home, they are less likely to go into shock.

Pots and cuts

Westerlay grows cymbidiums mainly as potted plants, with cuts as a sideline. When a plant has one blooming spike on it, for example, but a little later on in its life will likely bear two blooming spikes, the early bloomer may be cut and sent to market, provided the variety is one that performs well as a cut flower.

At Gallup & Stribling, on the other hand, production has shifted to include more cuts as competition has heated up in the potted-plant market. Here too, attention is paid to the fact that just because a particular hybrid performs well as a potted plant doesn't mean it's suitable for harvesting cuts. "In many cases we've been able to breed and develop a dual-use type of plant," says John Ernest, laboratory manager at Gallup & Stribling. "But we make sure that we cut only from plants that are bred for cutting."

The season for growing potted cymbidiums and for harvesting cuts is similar, except that California-grown potted plants may hit the market earlier, while cuts may be available longer. For Toine at Westerlay, the peak of his season is October through March. "We're focused on compact table plants" under three feet high, says Toine. The smaller plants, not surprisingly, come to maturity faster. By contrast, with cymbidiums bred to produce cut flowers, "you're

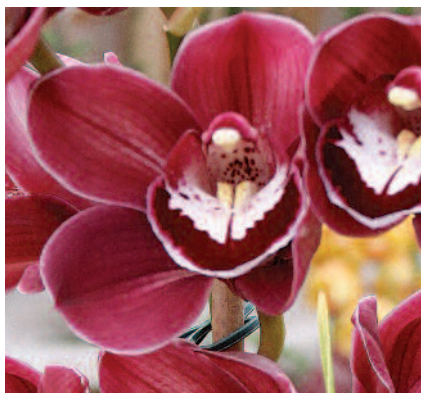
trying to get the longest spike possible with as many flowers as possible," he points out. "Those hybrids mature and bloom later"—conveniently supplying the market for Easter and Mother's Day.

Apart from the size of the plants and flowers and their performance as potted plants or cuts, the hybrids preferred as cut flowers tend to stand up straight, with all the flowers wide open and facing the same way. The potted-plant market has been more interested in novelty and therefore tolerant of such variants as a spike that hangs down or bears half-closed, cup-shaped flowers.

Old and new

When you order cut cymbidiums, you will probably be offered a box of mixed colors. If you request a box of blooms in, say, a trendy lime green or chocolate brown, and it is available, it will probably cost more. Why is that? Remember that cymbidium growers must make a long-term investment in plants that take three or more years before they produce flowers, and remain productive for perhaps another ten years. They do have a limited capacity to gear production toward seasonal demand: yellow and orange flowers in the fall, white and red in the winter, green and pink in the spring. But color trends change faster than cymbidium growers can keep up with them. They have to make conservative decisions about what to plant, and that includes keeping a mix on hand, rather than devoting too much production to one or two colors that might be hip today, gone tomorrow.

Some orchid growers take a long view in-



See the white cap at the center of the bloom, above the throat? That's the pollen cap. When purchasing or receiving cymbidiums, check to see that it is not damaged or dislodged. If it is, the flower will soon wilt.

deed. "A lot of us don't know the names of our own great-grandparents," says John at Gallup & Stribling. "But the genealogy of the orchids I work with can be traced hundreds of years, all the way back to original species in the wild." Gallup hybrids all bear tags with names and numbers that encapsulate that history and that qualify the hybrids for shows and awards. "Not every customer cares about the pedigree," John admits, "but it's part of the quality tradition"—a tradition always worth respecting. 🌿

care tips

cymbidium orchids

- Choose flowers that look crisp and turgid, with no brown edges or translucent spots. Select spikes with two or three buds on the tip and all the other blossoms open.
- Cymbidiums are mildly sensitive to ethylene and should be treated with an ethylene inhibitor for longest vase life. Follow manufacturer's instructions closely.
- Remove the water tube from the stem of a flower spike and slant cut one-half to one inch from the stem end. Place the stem in a clean water tube filled with a flower-food solution, or place it in a bucket with about one to two inches of flower-food solution.
- Individual blossoms should also have the water tube removed and a fresh cut given to the stem end. Place in a clean water tube filled with a flower-food solution.
- Condition both spikes and individual blossoms at room temperature for several hours or overnight. Store in a 45 to 50 degree F cooler with 80 percent humidity. Cyms are less chill sensitive than most orchids, but may suffer damage if kept in a standard floral refrigerator (at 34 to 36 degrees F) for any length of time. A corsage or bridal bouquet made with cyms may be stored overnight.
- To keep humidity levels high in storage, loosely cover cymbidiums with lightweight clear plastic.