



An orchid Obsession

One Blue Ash family's backyard hobby morphs into a way of life

By Sarah J. Dills

Photos by Robin Victor Goetz, RVGP Inc.

IF YOUR MENTAL IMAGE OF ORCHIDS has been painted in the garden center of your neighborhood super store, prepare to be educated. ♦ Stan and Elaine Better have taken their love for the flower from a pastime to an almost obsession, and they have educated themselves to what some may recognize as expert status along the way.

"Elaine's been in the backyard plant business her whole life, so it wasn't black to white," Stan says of their shift to orchids. "However, it is different." Elaine chimes into the conversations modestly saying, "My previous experience with orchids was killing one or two, and I knew I was going to have to read a lot."

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LEFT: The hothouse—or greenhouse—has been added to the side of the Better home to house their warm climate orchids. These orchids thrive in temperatures between 64 and 100 degrees. BELOW: Stan Better demonstrates the use of his unique watering system, the tank is shown behind him, to water the orchids in the cool climate—or basement—of their Blue Ash home.



The Betters have only been raising orchids for three years, but the average Joe off the street would not know it by entering their Blue Ash home. The Betters have put Stan's architectural knowledge—he owns Stan Better Construction—to good use as they have slowly transformed their average home into a biosphere for orchids. Three separate climates are represented for the plants in their home.

An orchid isn't just an orchid

On the American Orchid Society website, Dr. Rob Griesbach is quoted as saying, "Orchids are the largest group of flowering plants in nature. There are more than 25,000 identified species, with the total number probably reaching 30,000, and new species are being discovered each year. In addition to that, there are more than 120,000 hybrids registered with the Royal Horticultural Society. With so many choices, there's an orchid for every person's taste."

Stan and Elaine have three main environments for orchids in their home. A hothouse, which structurally looks like a greenhouse that has been added onto their kitchen, is used to house orchids that grow in warm climates. This area is kept between 64 and 100 degrees. A cool environment has been created in the Betters' basement to house orchids that thrive in temperatures around 68 degrees. "Most of what we are calling cool plants just don't like it hot," Stan admits. "Our basement didn't even have a staircase when we started, it was just a crawl space with a hatch in the closet."

The crown jewel of the Betters' orchid environments is definitely the intermediate area, which is a second level addition that Stan built three years ago. The couple was smart when designing the space, and they created a master suite for resale purposes. However, the only things sleeping in the master suite area of the home right now are plants. "A lot of orchids can float

into the intermediate climate," Stan says. "In the summer, we can take some of these plants outside."

This second level on the Betters' home has gradually morphed into more of a greenhouse area as well. "We basically finished the room as planned, and then we started the trial and error," Stan says. "We slowly started making changes, with the lighting and the water system." The lighting has been created through skylights that Stan admits make his home look like somewhat of a spaceship from the street. The bubble-like spheres project from the roofline. Special indoor lighting is also used, while drainage units on the tables and a durable flooring make watering the plants an ease. The Betters have even installed a watering system in all three of the environments, and Stan is extremely proud of the design.



LEFT: The second level of the Better home was built as a master suite for resale purposes, but it acts as an intermediate climate and gardening center for their orchids. BELOW: The gardening center of the second level can be seen here where a restaurant-style sink has been installed for watering and caring for plants.



Rain, rain—don't—go away

According to Stan, most members of the American Orchid Society that he has been in contact with use a reverse osmosis watering system for their orchids. This process of watering uses normal tap water and eliminates the chemicals before being put on the plants. “Hard water is not bad,” Stan says. “But it leaves crystallization on the leaves.”

Instead of this common method of watering, the Betters have opted for a 250-gallon water tank that uses rainwater collected from the Betters’ home. Stan created a watering system that transfers this water to every environment in his home. “This was just a guess on our part,” Stan admits. “We found that it works for us, and if we ever run dry we simply go back to regular tap water.”

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Moving to the big league

Although Stan and Elaine are actively involved in the American Orchid Society, it still amazes them due to their short amount of time working with the plants. “We’ve only been at it for three years,” Stan says. “The average member of the Orchid Society has been in this for 20 or 30 years.”

However, Stan and Elaine have proven that they are dedicated to orchids. What started as a collection of a couple dozen has grown into a home full of 1,000 orchids. “We initially just jumped into this, but now we realize this will be our retirement,” Stan says.



ABOVE: The Betters use labels to verify their orchids' species and age. RIGHT: The vibrant red of this orchid immediately catches the eye.



How does your orchid grow?

Stan Better admits that his wife Elaine is the primary caregiver for their 1,000 orchids. Although Stan has designed all of the environments and systems for their flowers, he knows they would not have the success that they do without his wife's hard work.

❖ "I can go days without doing much of anything but watering," Elaine modestly says. "Then there are days when I'm repotting for eight or 10 hours. It just depends." ❖ According to the American Orchid Society, anyone can grow orchids in their home without having a set-up like the Betters. If you have ever successfully grown a houseplant, you can grow orchids. Here are some tips from the American Orchid Society:

LIGHTING: Placing a plant near an east or west, or slightly shaded south, window is best. This is because the lighting here is incidental, which means it is at an angle and less severe on the plant. The plant should also be placed away from too much artificial light, because it may prevent the plant from flowering.

TEMPERATURE: Typical home temperatures between 60 and 75 degrees are optimal. Orchids grown in the home during colder months will respond well to being outdoors in the summer, as long as it is a protected area.

HUMIDITY: Furniture and fabrics can absorb much of the needed humidity in a home, so it is wise to group plants together to take advantage of their collective transpiration or place them on gravel-filled humidity trays to raise the humidity.

WATERING: Care must be taken to balance the rapid surface drying that can take place in the home with plants' lower metabolic processes resulting from lower light.

FERTILIZER: Fertilize regularly at a low dosage, but not as often during the winter.

**For more information on orchids, visit www.orchidweb.org*

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THIS PAGE: With more than 25,000 identified species of orchids, there are several options for color, shape and texture. The Betters have a variety of species, and they are continuously working to identify new species.



Not only have Stan and Elaine educated themselves, but they now work with the Orchid Society to educate others at their five shows each year. "He has really gotten involved in the exhibits," Elaine says. "This all started because Stan likes to build things, and he wanted to build a garden room ten years ago for our house plants." 🐛



FAR LEFT: A water drop prepares to fall from the petal of this orchid after a watering. LEFT: Shades of pink create contrast on this orchid's flower. BELOW: Not only do the Betters work in the second level of their home, they have created a sitting area and koi pond where they can relax and enjoy the beauty of their creation.

