



## Hooked on Orchids

ARTICLE BY ANDREA HARTLEY

**W**hen he wasn't watching his players shoot hoops, former Philadelphia 76ers owner Fitz Eugene Dixon, Jr., often was eyeballing orchids. That's right, orchids. At one point he was president of the American Orchid Society and his orchid collection was worth more than \$1 million.

Chris Rehmann understands that kind of commitment to the legendary plant. "Once you get involved with orchids, it's difficult not to become passionate about it," he said recently while strolling inside his backyard greenhouse in Hammonton.

A civil environmental engineer who is partner at the firm of Adams, Rehmann & Heggen, Rehmann got hooked during a vacation in Hawaii in 1982. He saw orchids. He bought two orchid plants. And now he has 2000 orchid plants that impress and de-stress him.

He doesn't sell them. Ever.

"My office is on the White Horse Pike in Hammonton; I don't want to start another business," he said. "My orchids are my pleasure and their beauty is breathtaking."

What he does sell is the hobby of raising orchids and the beauty of the plants. As current president of the American Orchid Society, Rehmann would consent to an interview only if the writer agreed to include information about the orchid society. He explained: "Our mission is to promote and support passion for orchids though

education and research. We are committed to conservation projects, funding research and educating people how to grow better orchids."

Rehmann said when he decided to become a judge in orchid competitions, his golf game got pushed to the back burner, though he still plays. He spent three years of study and three years on probation as a judge, now he travels to judge competitions in many spots he may never have seen otherwise. "Golf is intense competition," he said. "The main point of the orchid show is not really to compete, but to show the accomplishments of the grower. Everyone seems to enjoy the other's successes."

Walt Orr, owner of Waldor, an orchid nursery and store based in Linwood, said Rehmann first entered his store with questions typical of an orchid novice. "They are worried that the plant won't survive because they are thought to be fragile," he said, when in fact they are quite hardy.

"I think he is one of the [society's] best presidents we have ever had. He has taken a personal interest in increasing our membership and through his efforts we're exhibiting this year at the Philadelphia

International Flower Show for the first time in modern history."

Orchids are "in," said Rehmann and "it has become quite fashionable to decorate your home with orchids," he said. His tip: If you buy a \$20 plant at Home Depot (or wherever), the flowers will stay fresh for about two months if properly cared for. A flower arrangement may last only about one week.

Many plants that are in bloom have been placed in a small greenhouse off his kitchen, while the kitchen itself houses a spectacular rainbow of red, yellow, green, pink, blue, and white orchids, giving off a sweet fragrance. He said that not all orchids smell as sweet. Some have no fragrance at all and others have an offensive odor similar to that of rotting meat. This is a result of being pollinated by a fly.

Looking younger than his 70 years, Rehmann credits his wife for taking care of him and his hobby for decompressing him after eight hours of work and evenings spent at council meetings, where the firm founded by his father represents many municipalities. "Sometimes after a particularly stressful meeting that runs quite long, there is nothing better than to

# Orchids

## Origin of name

*From the Orkhis, Greek for "testicle," which the root sometimes resembles*

## Number of species

*28,000, plus 200,000 hybrids (mixed species)*

## High-priced species

*Endangered type of Ladyslipper species grown on a mountain in Borneo. One plant price: \$10,000*

## Big business number

*2007 Taiwan Orchid Show sold \$78.7 million in orchids to suppliers*

## Men and orchids

*Of 25 trustees of the 13,500-member American Orchid Society, 15 are men.*

*Source: Chris Rehmann, president, American*

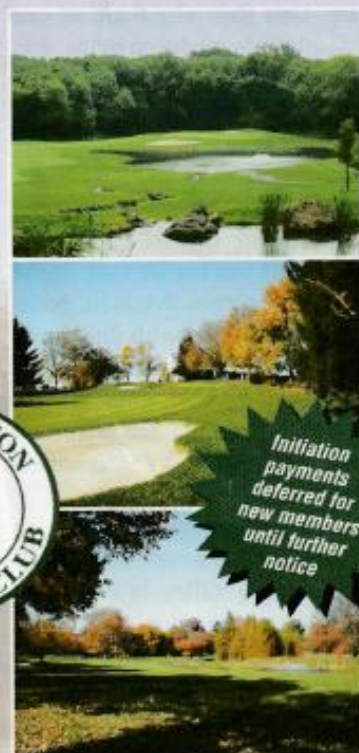
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walk into the greenhouse, turn the lights on and tinker with the plants a little bit because it is stress relieving," he said.

Rehmann's firm provides civil and environmental engineering, land surveying, environmental planning and landscape architecture. One service it provides is integrating digital images of tax maps with land use databases. As a result, he said: "If I'm doing a road program, our firm can easily go and notify everyone who lives on the road we are going to pave, explain what we will do, how long it will take and tell them that we won't be back for 20 years. When people are informed about what is going on, they make every effort to be tolerant of having their street torn up."

Rehmann's efficiency as an engineer has aided him in his care of the orchids. He said he has streamlined the feeding and watering of his multitude of plants with an automated system. He has to spend only about six hours a week supervising this system and doing some re-potting. The rest of the time is pure fun.

Orchids grow on every continent but Antarctica and it is believed that orchids probably co-existed with the dinosaurs. The plants are unique because the seeds they produce contain no nutrients and the orchid requires mycorrhizal fungi to germinate. Less than one tenth of one percent of all seeds produced in the wild will find the source of nutrition that they need to germinate. Very few hobbyists attempt to grow from seed since it requires sterile conditions.

Orchids are also classified as Epiphytical, which means they depend on another plant for support, but not for food. In the wild they grow on trees. Rehmann walks around his greenhouse, with fans humming to circulate the air, and holds a plant pot. His orchids, he said, grow in bark chips, not soil, except for one plant that he displays, that grows from a short section of tree branch.

The engineer described a trip to Ecuador that included a view from atop a hill overlooking a valley of blooming orchids. From his expression, it was clear that Chris Rehmann considered that beautiful scene at least a few notches above the tee view of the best fairway on the best golf course in the world.

"Orchids," he said. "are the queen of flowering plants." ■

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