

'We want the orchid to become as common as the rose'

By LORAIN McCLISH

Friends of Leona and Andy Caesar joke about the couple owning "the only jungle grown orchids in Michigan." The kidding stems from the family-owned hot houses in their back yard at 33054 Annwood, Farmington.

"Yes, I guess you could say it was a little crowded in here," Mrs. Caesar said as she opens the door to temperature, humidity and massive dark greenery dotted with hundreds of different bright and varied colored blooms.

The overall effect is certainly that of a jungle and in fact many of the plants were pulled from the trees in Guatemala, Ecuador and Honduras where the couple have traveled to collect orchid specimens.

They boast that the survival ratio of the plants they've brought back to Michigan was "very high, though we didn't get too many pictures. There is not enough light and too many ants. It is enough to discourage any photography," Caesar said.

The couple has been appointed co-chairmen of the Michigan Orchid Society's upcoming fall show for the Mid-America Division of the national organization, scheduled to be held in Tel-12 Mall, and will devote a lot of their summer to preparing for that.

LEADING UP to the show, Mrs. Caesar will be selling baby orchid plants in a booth at the mall, both as advertising for the upcoming show, as well as "trying to get people to understand that orchid growing is not that difficult."

"They can be raised on a window sill. We started with one cattleya (the specie best known as a corsage flower) we put near a vent on our old dishwasher. The kitchen is a good place for growing. So is the bathroom where there are occasional bursts of steam."

She continued to say that the orchid family is the largest flowering plant family in the world.

"Look at this," she says, as she extends a plant stem that has the feel of

a lead pencil. "They can be as hardy as that or so fragile with such a tiny bloom you'd need a microscope to see it."

There is no end to the variety of colors that a breeder can come up with. Some have no fragrance at all. Some are fragrant only in the sun and some are fragrant only after dark. The sizes and shapes are just as varied. Some will flower for months at a time and others will open only for a day. There are some that must hang because they bloom only from the bottom.

Persons who buy a plant from Mrs. Caesar this summer will in effect be buying a surprise package. "We know who the parents are," she says of the seedlings, "but we can't guarantee what the bloom will look like. That's that part of the fun, part of the challenge."

She will make very sure purchasers are well instructed on how to care for the plant "because we don't want any of these babies killed. We want all the buyers back to see our show and see what can be done with baby plants. We want the orchid to become as common as the rose."

THE CAESARS have held their orchid growing hobby for about 16 years and have collected during that time "a lot of silver (trophies) and a good many ribbons," Caesar said. They enter most of the competitions in the Mid-West and "have never come home empty handed," one situated so its contents can be viewed from the family room, a lath house where some of the plants summer, and very little grass.

"We grow less and less grass each year," Caesar said, pointing to a new rock garden, a pond that is being created, new patches in the landscaping that are blocked off for another variety of flower.

"We do pretty well with the garden too," Mrs. Caesar said. "We understand some people have problems with rhododendrons but ours was so crowded with blooms this spring we could hardly see the greenery."



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