

WHERE THE ORCHIDS BLOOM

EXUBERANT COLLECTIONS, LONGTIME LOCAL GROWERS AND A WARM, SUBTROPICAL CLIMATE PROVE COLLIER COUNTY IS AN ORCHID-LOVER'S PARADISE.

BY JAYNIE BARTLEY | JULY 1, 2023



(Photo by Anna Nguyen / Arrangements by Elaine Gates)

The buzz of conversation emanates from Naples Conference Center as Gulf Coast Orchid Alliance (GCOA) begins their final season meeting. I enter the cheerful chaos to find Florida Gulf Coast University's orchid expert John Finer weaving through the crowd, a white folding chair hoisted overhead. "We're running out of chairs," he shouts. I'm here to meet John and his Rolodex of orchid contacts in a pursuit to discover why the tropical flowers are omnipresent in our community.

Flipping through *Gulfshore Life* archives dating back to 1970, we repeatedly find the flowers in society photos and editorial features. For one city to hold two orchid clubs—Naples Orchid Society formed in 1963, long before GCOA formed in 2012—with hundreds of members each and to be home to a flourishing annual orchid show, there must be something behind the obsession. So what makes Collier County an orchid lover's mecca?

With humid, sunny days and a quick stint of 'Florida winter' (read: 68 degrees and sunny), South Florida has more than 60 native orchid species—many growing in our backyard swamps and cypress forests. **Just south of Miami, Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden's** decade-old Million Orchid Project aims to plant 1 million natives throughout the Everglades. On our coast, the ghost orchid is renowned for its singular bloom. In peak season, a telescope is planted on the boardwalk at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, pointing directly to the drooping white flower grafted to a far-off towering cypress. And Naples Botanical Garden recently exhibited the breed at London's esteemed RHS Chelsea Flower Show.

Serious orchid collectors, like GCOA president Jim Longwell, don't stop with one orchid. They have thousands. Each GCOA meeting starts with members showing off their prized flowers—a 2-foot-tall dendrobium with bamboo-like spikes and pink-tipped flowers, a drooping LC Cornelia hybrid resembling a dancing flower from *Alice in Wonderland*. Members and visitors peruse at least 100 vibrant blooms that hang from racks and fill tables around the room's perimeter. Vice president Elaine Gates, who's unpacking Hawaiian orchids to hand out as prizes, says a turnout like this has become commonplace as the club's membership skyrockets. Naples Orchid Society president Jim Davenport later echoes her sentiments, telling me the society's annual orchid show at Naples Botanical Garden saw 5,000 visitors this February.

While most local collectors source their blooms from shows and growers nationwide, newcomers might look to Jade Orchids in South Naples. Owners Judy and David White launched the farm 36 years ago. Now the only commercial grower in the county, the couple stocks common types such as moth-like phalaenopsis, fragrant vandas and dainty dendrobiums. For a no-maintenance option, seasonal residents and not-so-green thumbs opt for hyperrealistic artificial orchids from Naples' Sweetgrass Galleries, where owner Norine Fuller stocks dozens of handpainted fabric varieties. (Hot take: Elaine says many collectors stick faux spikes in their real plants between blooming periods.) Off the rock, Marco Island Florist offers same-day delivery for artful orchid arrangements.

For observers, Naples Botanical Garden's dreamy LaGrippe Orchid Garden reveals the species' diversity through towering lady slippers with wispy petals, big-bloom vandas with stick-straight roots grazing the floor and magenta Miltoniopsis showing off painterly petals. The Garden's head of collections, Nick Ewy, favors native Florida breeds like the fiery butterfly orchids commonly found growing in sabal palms and bald cypress throughout the county—more proof that Collier truly is an orchid lover's paradise.



With two thriving orchid clubs in town, aficionados love showing off unique hybrids, like the Wilhelmaria Pinot Princess 'Scary' (above) and classics, such as the dendrobium (below, center). (Photos by Anna Nguyen / Arrangements by Elaine Gates)

