Growing Orchids in the Southern Cape

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In June 2004 Robert and I sold our farm, Stellenkloof, which was situated 50 km from Cape Town, and relocated up the south coast to The Ark outside George.

The farm is at the foot of the Outeniqua Mountains about 7 km from the town of George and 20 km from the sea. Around 200 or so years ago the farm would have been part of the indigenous forest, but only a few of the old yellowwoods, Podocarpus falcatus and P. henkelii, still remain in the kloof behind us. We have a stream running through the farm and two large dams. For what more could one ask?

We were able to start on the alterations to the farm in July of 2004 and, as there was no suitable structure for the greenhouse, I had to start the construction of the nursery from scratch and was lucky enough to be told ‘build what you want’. My idea was to choose a size that I could manage if there was no staff to help me so I settled for a 6 m x 21 m internal dimension which gave me four rows of benching each 19.5 m

Rhyncholaeliocattleya Fort Watson ‘Mendenhall’ (Cattleya S.J. Bracey x Rlc. Oconee).
long with two walkways of a metre width each. Benching is all expanded metal and is 1 metre from the ground. I also have a potting and a service area for customers.

The exterior of the greenhouse was based on the bonsai house at Kew Gardens which I had seen many years ago with the primary difference being that the bonsai house roof was also glass panes, something I was definitely not going to replicate here in sunny South Africa. My roofing material is polycarbonate in an opal colour; the sides are solid 1.2 m high walls above which are square, glass windows with every third one able to open outwards. A small square of shade net covers each open window as I was advised that the local monkeys would love to eat the flowers! Doors and window frames are all aluminium. The internal walkways are cemented so that I can damp them down to increase humidity.

A huge problem in Stellenbosch was the proximity to the nursery of many very tall gum trees so here I was extremely particular in situating the new greenhouse away from any large trees. The greenhouse runs north-south so I have plenty of sunlight throughout the day. There is a 50% Aluminet cloth under the roofing and 50% white shade cloth hanging over the east-facing windows to prevent leaf burn in the early morning. The west-facing windows
are now all painted with whitewash to reduce the harsh afternoon sunlight.
Another problem in Stellenbosch was the inferior water quality from the Theewaterskloof Dam. Their irrigation supply system delivered water with an Electrical Conductivity (EC) reading of over 2,000. I now collect all the rainwater into two 10,000 litre water tanks and it is generally sufficient for my needs. If desperate, I can pump out of the dam to fill them and a small pump boosts the water pressure. All watering is done by hand and there are no overhead sprinklers.
I also have 12 oscillating fans that are on 24/7 plus an extractor fan for removing heat at temperatures over 22°C. This is the sum total of all ‘gadgets’ in the nursery – no more fogging systems or anything fancy that can go wrong, with all hand watering, potting, spraying and general care done by the boss herself! Once a week I have a helper to do the cleaning up before our Wednesday open morning when the general public and orchidists are all welcome to enjoy the plants. It has become a popular venue for the locals to meet – with us providing
tea and coffee outdoors on nice days.
The big change for me was the weather conditions on the Garden Route – it is difficult to believe that 420 km can make such a difference. Stellenbosch was in the normal Mediterranean climate pattern of hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters with little or no frost. George, being on the southern coastline of South Africa, seems to have rain all year round with no specific dry months. People speak of 70 mm per month throughout the year, but I have found it more irregular than that. January can be dry and also June yet this year we have just had 180 mm for January so, as I say, anything goes! The annual rainfall average is around 850 – 900 mm. We have experienced at least 3 ‘cut-off low pressure systems’ since being here, each time getting between 200 - 350 mm of rain over very short periods of time which causes havoc with the local road system and much flooding on our farm.

Summers are warm and humid with temperatures ranging from day time highs of up to 33°C and night time lows of 15°C. An average daytime temperature is likely to be around 24°C. These are ideal temperatures for orchids. Winters are cooler than I expected with day temperatures 18 – 20°C and the nights getting as cold as 1 – 4°C. There is no frost to speak of, but we do see patches on the driveway after cold, clear nights. Winter brings the dreaded Berg winds blowing in from the Karoo semi-desert and these winds are warm, dry and very strong and can raise temperatures to around 33°C. All in its path are flattened especially here at the
foot of the mountains. They can last from a few hours to a few days and this wind is something I really could do without!

My biggest problem in the first two years was not understanding the quick changes in conditions during the day, especially in summer. We were told that ‘George has 4 seasons in one day’, but I didn’t know how to relate that to the orchids. I soon found out that if I treated the plants as I had in Stellenbosch and misted them 2 or 3 times a day in the summer that I was going to have a fungal problem on the leaves. I also wasn’t told that the George area has the highest fungal spore count in South Africa. Needless to say it took me three years to grow out most of the ugly spotting on the leaves and I am now careful to mist only early in the morning – plants must be dry by 11am. Other than the fungal problem, we have the usual scale and the occasional mealie bug, but nothing that isn’t controllable.

Orchids currently grown in my greenhouse are cattleyas, paphiopedilums, phragmipediums, beallaras and a variety of other intermediate orchids. I grow cymbidiums from flask to flowering, but then sell them as they primarily require shade house conditions here in the Southern Cape in order to bloom at their best.

Most of the local orchid growers have shade houses with 60% shade cloth; a few have a solid roof with shade cloth sides. All the growers have great success with cattleyas, cymbidiums, plain leaf paphiopedilums, oncidiums, brassias and many other cool and intermediate orchids. We generally grow in bark mixes and use plastic containers. Our water quality from the George Dam is more than acceptable for use on the orchids. We have a keen Orchid Society, the Orchid Society of the Southern Cape, and a popular Orchid Show is held in September each year. I am finding more and more people moving to the area from Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal and I hope this article will provide some information to those who are perhaps thinking of relocating to this delightful part of South Africa.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elsa Hall started growing orchids in 1978 and within a few months opened Longkloof Orchid Nursery. The nursery then became Leeukoppie Orchids and shortly thereafter Stellenkloof Orchids which operated in Stellenbosch for 23 years specialising in miniature and standard cymbidiums and then cattleyas and other intermediate orchids. In 2004 the nursery relocated to George and became Outeniqua Orchids. Elsa is now active on the committee of the Orchid Society of the Southern Cape and involved in educational talks on growing and potting of orchids. She also plans on mapping and photographing the wild orchids of the Outeniqua.