

The Orchid Lady

BY ASHLEY WAHL • PHOTOGRAPHS BY HANNAH SHARPE

“**T**his town calls me ‘The Orchid Lady,’” declares Linda Thorne, of Seagrove, North Carolina. Her two miniature collies, Bow Bell and Wink, wag around in the grass below, digging up juicy beetles and other grubby delights.

Bow Bell suddenly leaps on top of the worn wooden picnic table where we sit and flaunts for a moment. Her owner lets out a startled laugh.

“Bow!”

Linda makes a playful comment about the poor-mannered pup, then scoops her up and places her down once again to roam freely on their slice of rural paradise.

Bow Bell and Wink were both named after orchids: one after a famous white Cattleya, the other after one of Linda’s own creations.

“Wink is the very first hybrid orchid I ever made,” Linda shares. Her lemon-colored hair softly tousles in the wind as she reflects, “That was back in 1997.”

When a hybrid plant flowers for the first time, the gardener who produced it is granted the right to name it, even if someone else has already crossed the same two orchids.

“It’s sort of like a race,” she explains.

“If someone in Minnesota crosses the same seeds as I do, at the very same time, mine is likely to flower first because of the North Carolina climate.”

She shares an anecdote from a few years back about experimenting with the same cross as someone in Hawaii. Needless to



say, the other orchid gardener earned the privilege of titling the blossoming beauty. They called it Pink Elf.

Despite this incident, Linda’s diligence and zest for creating her own lovely combinations has enabled her to name several orchids, many of which are after those near and dear to her. Thus, Linda’s mother, grandmother and great aunt have all been florally immortalized.

Last year a vibrant yellow hybrid of hers offered its first jubilant flower. “I gave it the best name...” she pauses as her blue eyes brighten, “...Screaming Bananas!”

Just 10 years ago, this Maryland native moved down to pottery town, USA, with about 500 orchids. Today, her greenhouses host more than 10,000 of her favorite exotic flowers. With the help of her partner, Mike, Linda owns and runs Seagrove

Orchids. Year-round, people from all over contact Linda to make orchid purchases or simply to ask this orchid guru for advice and guidance with their own plants.

“One time I had a farmer drive over here on his tractor to buy one of my flowers for his wife,” she shares. “It was the sweetest thing.”

At the beginning of their 18-year romance, Mike too would gift Linda with orchids. But it was Linda herself who purchased her first one, a Phalaenopsis.

“It wasn’t flowering,” she confesses.

“I was working at a desk job and had it in there with me under the fluorescent lights. It never flourished, but it wasn’t dead.”



Five years later, when she left her job and moved the plant into her home, Linda discovered the element that was essential to its prosperity: lighting. Under natural light, her orchid quickly began to flower.

“It’s really the perfect beginner orchid,” she claims of the low maintenance Phalaenopsis, “so it’s the one that I talk about the most.”

As a member of the American Orchid Society and a contributor to various orchid shows all over the United States, Linda is frequently asked to share her knowledge and expertise. A few weeks ago, in fact, she was dubbed “The Orchid Doctor” at a Home and Garden show in Pennsylvania and offered culture advice and tips during a weekly spot on the local news.

A motorized vehicle zooms along the road behind me, temporarily disrupting the rustic ambiance.

“Look, it’s your boyfriend!” she exclaims to her barking fur-children. “I wonder if he’s stopping by today...”

Curious, I twist my torso around to see

the tail end of a FedEx truck. He’s not stopping today, but there’s always hope for tomorrow.

As the sound of the engine fades away, Linda and I mosey into the greenhouse. This fragrant wonderland – composed of rows and rows of individually intricate orchids – is Linda Thorne’s office.


“I repot orchids all day,” she admits.

Each enchanting treasure must be repotted either annually or every three to four years. Though this mundane task may seem endless, it is vital.

“If you don’t have your hands on them, you can’t see problems,” she says.

The furry driveway alarms begin to bark once again as a woman from Southern Pines pulls in to pick up an order of assorted orchids that Linda selected earlier in the morning.

As Linda politely excuses herself to assist her customer, I seize the opportunity to do some premium sniffing about in the cool and airy greenhouse. Prompted by a sign that reads “I smell good,” I start with the



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Chocolate orchid. My nostrils are in heaven.

The orchid family (Orchidaceae) is one of the largest flowering plant families in the world, containing over 20,000 species. I breathe in and ogle at quite a variety of them, but soon realize that I would need some number of days to appreciate them all individually.

The customer leaves carrying a boxful of beauties. Linda hustles to the back end of the greenhouse. She returns to spot that I've been busy sniffing with a bright smile and a pot cradling her Screaming Bananas.

"The most satisfying thing about what I do is seeing an orchid I've produced from seed flower for the very first time," she asserts.

Linda and Mike spend a fair amount of time in their orchid laboratory not only experimenting with new hybrid plants, but also cloning orchids.

"It's tedious," she says of the process, which has significantly lowered the cost of several orchids, helping them become available to those other than collectors.

"But the old orchids that have never been cloned hold their value," she informs me. "If a natural disaster, an accident or some other unfortunate event occurs, they are lost forever."

As the holidays creep closer, Linda will become increasingly busy, bustling about, carefully selecting her finest orchids for special orders and deliveries. Although people buy these exotic flowers for various reasons, for their lovers or themselves, to say "Hello" or "Thank you," now is a particularly popular time.

"So..." I struggle to articulate the obvious question, "what is it about orchids that so captivates people?"

The orchid lady simply laughs.

"Just look at them!" PS

Seagrove Orchids is located at 451 Brower Mill Road and is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 am – 5 pm. If you are interested in learning more about Seagrove Orchids, you may visit Linda's website at seagroveorchids.com or contact Linda by phone at (336) 879-6677.

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