

Len Ellentuch

by Deborah Medenbach, February 2010

Len Ellentuch didn't expect his business meeting on behalf of the Atomic Energy Commission in Thailand to end with his initiation into what would become his passion for the next 30 years.

"We'd finished our business and after tea my host asked 'Would you like to see my hobby?'" Ellentuch said. He politely followed the man into the back yard, where cattleya orchids grew by the thousands as far as the eye could see under a delicate scree of sun-shielding veils.

"This was something that interested me. I'd always loved plants, even as a kid," Ellentuch said, recalling school educational gardens at PS 26 in the Bronx and later learning the intricacies of raising African violets. Here in the Thai garden, the vision of diverse blooms captured his imagination and he resolved to learn more.

When Ellentuch returned to his home in Wallkill, his first plants were phalaenopsis, or "moth orchids." He refused to read a single book or attend any orchid grower's meetings for several years.

"I was just going to find out what works for me. I wanted to learn, and so just listened and watched and the plants taught me," Ellentuch said. "I killed a few. If you don't lose orchids, you're not growing orchids."

As co-owner of Cabletronics in Newburgh, Ellentuch spent four hours each morning tending plants and then went to the office before noon to conduct the day's business.

"I owned the business. I had the luxury to be able to do that," Ellentuch explained. His windows soon were filled with plants and he expanded into a small greenhouse, where, by the time he had 1,000 plants, he felt he was ready to consider joining the New York Orchid Society. He and some friends founded the International Phalaenopsis Alliance in the 1980s, which is still active around the globe today.

"Then people started telling me that paphiopedilums are too hard to grow. It's a challenge and not just for anyone. Well, having them say it was hard to do bothered me, so I wanted that challenge. You could say, it was a 'growing' hobby!," Ellentuch said, his blue eyes twinkling under bushy white eyebrows and a lion's mane of snowy hair.

He'd already outgrown his small greenhouse and was enough of a dedicated enthusiast with the financial wherewithal to expand again.

"I had a greenhouse shipped over by boat from England and a team of English technicians assembled it in my yard. The English make much better greenhouses than you can find here in America," Ellentuch said. The outer layer was strong enough for a man to walk on and could withstand snow loads. The inner layer kept condensation away from the plants. He installed commercial tables that could be moved with a single finger even when filled with hundreds of orchids.

"You spend just as much time taking care of the best orchids as the worst, so why bother growing the worst?" Ellentuch asked. He scouted out the rarest paphiopedilums and spent \$900 on a single Rothschild orchid seed.

"Always, the best of the species were Rothschilds and they bred everything from it, but they didn't reproduce it because it took 18 years to bloom. Nowadays they know more and you can get a bloom in two years if you make a cross," Ellentuch said. A grower brought the seed to a seedling state over the course of a couple of years and sent it to Ellentuch, who grew the baby plant on a windowsill with all his other orchids for nearly two decades, almost missing its long-awaited flowering.

"One day I was out watering the orchids and I saw that it was in bloom. I didn't realize it was getting ready until it was already in bloom," he said. He tried to make some hybrid crosses with the six flowers, but nothing took and the plant never bloomed for him again.

"I gave it away," he said.