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Orchid hobby blooms into a business

Greenhouse in Chester sells to tri-state area

BY CHRISTIAN LIVERMORE
Times Herald-Record

TOWN OF CHESTER — Margaret Bridge bought her first orchid 10 years ago.

Then she bought another.
Then another.

Before she knew it, she had about 120 of them. She built a little greenhouse in her backyard to cultivate them.

At first, she thought of it as only a hobby, a kind of botanical therapy. Then, one day while surfing the Web in search of more orchids to buy, she spotted an ad for an orchid business for sale in Chester, Black Meadow Flora.

She bought it, and went from having 200 square feet of greenhouse space to 12,000.

Now she sells orchids to a variety of clients from Syracuse to western Connecticut and northern New Jersey. They include garden centers, floral shops, orchid societies, and her biggest client — The New York Botanical Garden — to whom she sells between 3,500 and 4,000 orchids a year. The orchids are sold in the garden's gift shop during its annual orchid show, which runs through April 25 at the Botanical Garden in the Bronx.

There's just something about orchids, Bridge said. "They're just so unusual. There are probably up to 25,000 species of orchids, and then you have 100,000 or more hybrids," she said.

"The colors are amazing, the fragrances are amazing, and the size of the plants. You have the teeniest little orchids the size of your fingernail to absolutely tremendous orchids, 12 to 16 inches across. Every one of them is unique. They're just fascinating."



TOM BUSHEY/Times Herald-Record

Orchids come in all shapes and sizes, with 25,000 species and 100,000 or more hybrids, says Margaret Bridge, who owns Black Meadow Flora in Chester. She sells the flowers throughout the tri-state area — and provides up to 4,000 a year to her biggest client, the New York Botanical Garden.



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MARGARET BRIDGE
Owner, Black Meadow Flora

Bridge is one of a number of commercial orchid growers in Orange County that cater to a slightly obsessive fascination with the flowers. The Orchid Mall, a website that tracks orchid societies, lists more than 200 in the United States alone.

Lots of orchid fans

If the membership of the Mid-

Hudson Orchid Society is any indication, orchids are what might be called a constructive obsession for many people in the region. Between 60-100 people attend the organization's meetings during the course of the year, and the society's show March 12 drew between 150-175 attendees.

Society President Elisabeth Mansfield said the proliferation

of inexpensive orchids available in supermarkets and home-improvement and garden stores has turned orchid cultivation from an elite activity into a hobby virtually anyone can pursue.

Mansfield herself admits to an addiction to orchid cultivation. Whenever she can, she escapes to her greenhouse to tend the several hundred orchids she

grows there.

"I have a very stressful life and a very stressful job, and it is delightful to just step into that greenhouse on a cold winter day," she said. "It's 95 degrees and it's humid and things are in bloom, and it's a wonderful place to be."

A labor of love

As for Black Meadow Flora, Bridge and her children — daughters Micki Bridge and Allison Clemens and son David Bridge — are working on building up the business. It will be years before it's profitable, but for Bridge it's an opportunity to make a living doing what she loves.

"I love coming here every day," she said. "I love working with the customers, and I love looking at the orchids."