

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO IMPORTING ORCHIDS

My memories of attending the 9th World Orchid Congress in Thailand are punctuated with basic culture shock, probably typical of first-time tropical tourists. Visions of literally acres of dendrobium fields in bloom and the riot of vandaceous rainbows at every orchid nursery are precious mental keepsakes.

Such cerebral reminders of Thailand were distinctly enhanced while waiting for and unpacking the living souvenirs (read: *purchased plants*). Obviously the joys and pleasures of importing orchids are something I've enjoyed.

However, the inability to travel to exotic destinations and personally hand picking your living treasures shouldn't deter you from trying your hand at importing orchids once in a while.

You Need a Permit

Assuming you already have catalogs or listings obtained from overseas growers who advertise in the *AOS Bulletin* or *The Orchid Digest* or elsewhere, the first thing you need to do is secure an import permit from:

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service
Plant Protection & Quarantine Program
Permit Unit
Hyattsville, MD 20782

You must state that you are interested in acquiring a permit to import orchids. The permit is valid for three years. The U.S. also has special rules governing entry of merchandise from foreign countries, one of which is that such materials are subject to inspection at the first port of entry into this country.

So in your application to the Permit Office, you may wish to specify a number of points of entry, depending on which part of the world you are importing from. Thus, it's a good idea to indicate several points of entry -- New York (JFK), Hoboken (Newark), Los Angeles, Miami, Seattle, etc.

Your Personal Import Number

The permit office will send special shipping labels with your personal import number already imprinted. In turn, when you place an order with an overseas (NOT Hawaii) grower, you are required to send them one of these labels, which they affix to the package of your plants.

You must establish with the foreign grower just how your plants are to be shipped -- airmail, air freight or if you are, in fact, travelling with the plants, as carry on luggage. Airmail is the transportation method of choice, since it is the

least complicated (for you) and requires the least amount of handling.

Involved But Reasonably Quick

If you have ordered plants valued in excess of \$400, your package is subject to customs' duties, which will be collected when it is delivered to you. Basically the procedure is that the plants arrive at whichever point of entry, are checked by customs, then go to the USDA Inspection Office at that particular airport where they are inspected, and if everything is okay, are repacked and sent to you by mail. It's involved, but is a surprisingly quick procedure.

If you use air cargo or airfreight for larger shipments, you probably will need a customs' broker, whose job it is to accompany the order through customs to USDA and then deliver it to you. Fees for such services can become expensive (usually starting at about \$100 per shipment) so be certain the cost is warranted.

Another wrinkle is CITES -- the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species which regulates worldwide commerce in orchid species (among other things). The exporter (the overseas grower in this case) is required to provide the CITES permits. Of course, along the way you are paying for the expense of such permits, since usually there is a fine line of print in the advertisements telling you it will cost X-number of dollars for permits and handling.

The CITES Business

If for some reason you want or need CITES information and up-to-date restrictions, you can obtain material from:

Federal Wildlife Permit Office
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Box 3507, Arlington, VA 22203.

Okay, you've finally got the plants. What do you do with them? Immediately remove them from the shipping carton. Place the plants in a shady, breezy spot. Air movement around the plants is important at this point to dissipate any possible residual gases from quarantine.

Examine each plant for damage or bruises and cut away any disease. A fungicide dip is a recommended precaution. Some growers suggest a soak of one-quarter teaspoon of sugar in five gallons of tepid water as a bit of jump start for the plants. They should be allowed to dry off, then potted or slabbed. If there are not roots, place in a transparent plastic baggie with a little moist sphagnum moss; this will usually generate root growth in time.

If all this leaves you undaunted, you're ready for the romance and the adventure.

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*from the Greater New York Orchid Society
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