

Burnham Nurseries' 50 years at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show



2007

SUNDAY 18 MAY 1958 saw Burnham Nurseries arriving at our first Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show as exhibitors. We had arrived over a series of stepping stones, exhibiting first at provincial flower shows, then at the annual orchid shows at Vincent Square and finally at the ultimate of all flower shows, Chelsea.

We had attended the show for a number of years as observers, studying the groups, the number of plants, the amount of space they took up etc, in anticipation for this, our first exhibit.

Orchids had always played a very important part at Chelsea and on this occasion there were six other exhibits from nurserymen who welcomed us, newcomers, with caution. All of them were old hands at exhibiting, while our display consisted mainly of *Cymbidium* hybrids, late-flowering varieties which were ideal for a May show. We were described by John Blowers in *The Orchid Review* as, 'A splendid exhibit'.

Satisfied with the results achieved and the success and publicity of the show, we decided to return again the following year.

BRIAN RITTERSHAUSEN on the highlights of showing orchids at Chelsea, by three generations of a family business, which has gained 19 gold medals

World Orchid Conference

The news that the 3rd World Orchid Conference was to be held in conjunction with Chelsea made us determined to be there in 1960. This was the largest display of orchids in England for many years. It occupied the whole of the east side of the Grand Marquee with 17 exhibits from all over the world – mass displays of dendrobiums and vandas from Malaya, wonderful orchids from Hawaii, Kenya

and Europe, many varieties which we had never seen before. The whole show was a breathtaking spectacle.

The event did a great deal of good for the orchid industry in Britain, and also helped the RHS promote Chelsea. With a full order book and many of the plants to be exported, successful trade at subsequent Chelseas was guaranteed. Gordon W Dillon, editor of the *American Orchid Society Bulletin*, had written that, the 'Chelsea Show is the crossroads of the orchid world.'

Chelsea was always top of the list on any orchid grower's agenda, a show not to be missed. In the late 1970s the British Orchid Growers' Association decided to ask the RHS if a combined exhibit could be put on the Monument site. This is the most prestigious site



1958: Smartly dressed gardeners head towards the Grand Marquee and to Burnham Nurseries first ever display

1960: Her Majesty The Queen admiring orchids exhibited for awards

Opposite: Part of Burnham Nurseries 50th display at Chelsea 2007



RHS Lindley Library

at Chelsea and anyone who takes it on is expected to do their very best. The site is enormous and is usually occupied by nurseries exhibiting large trees and shrubs, which fill the space well. To attempt an orchid exhibit was frowned on by the RHS as they were unsure if we were capable of doing it.

As the track records of the nurseries involved were so good, it was finally agreed that the British Orchid Growers' Association (BOGA) could have the site in 1985. This meant that there would be no other orchid exhibit at the Chelsea Flower Show that year, just the one large display.

Orchids grace Monument site

The whole exhibit was carpeted in turf to give the effect of a lawn with meandering paths made of bark. The orchids were displayed in square boxes, raised at various heights with each nursery allocated a different section. The complete exhibit was judged as one stand and the judges were happy in awarding it an RHS Gold Medal, and the Lawrence Medal for the best exhibit of the year. The RHS was thrilled and considered it one of the finest exhibits they had ever seen on the Monument site.

The star of our display was a large group of *Cattleya* Irene Holguin 'Brown Eyes', AM /AOS. This May flowering orchid is ideal for Chelsea, the flowers last for six weeks and each bloom is as large as a dinner plate. They are deep purple with a darker lip and were flanked by banks of *Coelogyne nitida* (syn. *C. ochracea*), both plants being highly scented.

A last minute request

In 1988 the unthinkable happened – the RHS approached us in January to say that the exhibitor for the Monument site had pulled out and would we be able to help. We teamed up with two other orchid nurseries and Anmore Exotics, who are well known for their large displays of tropical foliage plants. The exhibit was to be called The Rain Forest and, using timber that had been blown down in the great storm of the previous winter, a long house was constructed with a thatched roof, surrounded by ponds and waterfalls. The whole display was filled with beautiful foliage plants and orchids. The exhibit was a stunning contrast to the site we had worked only a few years before. The RHS were delighted that we had saved the day!



Ed Gabriel/Photos GB

The evolution of Chelsea

Over the past 50 years, a dozen or so orchid nurseries have been regular or casual exhibitors, all of which, one by one, have gradually ceased to exist or dropped out of the show, leaving just Burnham Nurseries and McBean's Orchids as regular exhibitors. The orchid scene at Chelsea has changed dramatically. The increased publicity from the television coverage the show receives means that it is still a very popular event but not the big orchid attraction it used to be. Gone are the serious gardeners and big collectors. Today the crowds consist of casual visitors and overseas tourists. To cope with the changing times, our exhibits have grown, with far more plants and space than we ever used before. There is a greater emphasis on pot plant orchids more suitable for the windowsill grower, *Phalaenopsis* being



In 1985, the whole exhibit was carpeted in turf to give the effect of a lawn with meandering paths made of bark



Michael Warren

in great demand. In spite of the changes, Chelsea remains the most prestigious show in the RHS calendar, and the one that brings us the most publicity.

Our 50th display at Chelsea

2007 was our 50th year at the show, and we marked it with a display including phragmipediums, vandas and phalaenopsis with a commemorative plaque at the centre. The judges awarded us a Gold Medal, our 18th over the years. To put the icing on the cake, Her Majesty The Queen paid a visit to the stand, and was most impressed by the blue-coloured vandas, which she said she had not seen on her visits to Singapore. We also had good coverage in the local papers and the national gardening magazines, mentions on the local TV news and even an interview with Lorraine Kelly on her BBC TV show.

Ed Gabriel/Photos GB



1960: Chelsea visitors view the exhibits in the Grand Marquee

1985: Highly scented, purple *Cattleya* Irene Holquin 'Brown Eyes' with blooms as large as dinner plates stole the show

1987: Large-flowered *Cattleya* hybrids were backed by statuesque pink and white-flowered *Cymbidium*

1995: Part of the exhibit showing the wide range of colour and markings in *Miltoniopsis* hybrids

The highs and lows of Chelsea

Since 2005 the show has increased in length by an extra day, finishing on the Saturday afternoon instead of the Friday. Chelsea has always been a very demanding show, in cost, time and effort. After each show we often wonder if it is worth carrying on, but each year the lure of the spotlight draws us back. This year our 12m long display boasted over 500 plants, including new varieties of *Phalaenopsis*, different varieties in the *Oncidiinae* alliance, dendrobiums and zygopetalums to name a few, and was awarded a Gold Medal. We were delighted after all the hard work we had put in. After a good rest, I am sure we will be back again next year, with another large, splendid display to entertain the public. We look forward to seeing you there in 2009! ■

Ed Gabriel/Photos GB



BRIAN RITTERSHAUSEN is Vice Chairman of the RHS Orchid Committee, a BOC Judge and co-author with his sister Wilma of many books about orchids

2000: The new Great Pavilion lets in much more light than the old Grand Marquee, so the true colours of the orchids can be seen more accurately

2008: Part of this year's display, featuring colourful *Vanda* hybrids and red *Burrageara*, backed by tall pink and white *Calanthe* specimens

Martin Mulchinock

