

A dazzling spectacle of orchids will mesmerize at Tower Hill

By **James Sullivan** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 10, 2022, 6:06 p.m.



Orchids are photographed through decorative lights at Tower Hill Botanic Garden for “Prismatic, an Orchid Exhibition.” JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

BOYLSTON — There’s a seduction underway here at Tower Hill Botanic Garden. The humans are coming to see the orchids. As usual, the humans don’t stand a chance.

Orchids are smart flowers, as Susan Orlean once wrote. “There is something clever and un-plantlike,” she suggested, about “their genius for seducing human beings for hundreds and hundreds of years.”

One of the oldest horticultural societies in the country is brightening the winter months with a colorful riot of orchids, the plant world's most evocative family. Running Feb. 12 through March 20, "[Prismatic, An Orchid Exhibition](#)" combines living sculptures and green walls with rainbow-colored art installations, creating a dazzling spectacle under the skylights inside Tower Hill's twin conservatories.

To source the orchids for this year's exhibit, the Tower Hill staff asked their suppliers to provide the widest variety of colors they could manage.

"We said, 'We want a rainbow. Make it happen!'" horticulturist Megan Varnes said recently. On a frosty day, she pattered around the greenhouse in T-shirt sleeves, pointing out the newly arrived flowers and the work her team was doing to arrange them for the exhibit.



Greg Farrington, conservatory Gardner at Tower Hill Botanic Garden waters the orchids in the greenhouse which will be used in the show, "Prismatic, an Orchid Exhibition." JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

“They popped out of the box looking perfect,” she said. The orchids are so fragrant you can smell them even with a mask on, she noted. (Her own mask was aptly decorated with flowers.)

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For “Prismatic,” the gardening staff built potting towers from lengths of PVC pipe with holes cut in the sides. The orchids are replanted into the towers, which are filled with potting soil and sphagnum (also known as peat) moss. Working with dichroic film, the staff turned the conservatories — the Orangerie and the Limonaia — into prisms, with colored light reflecting the natural rays of the sun.

In the café, a dichroic chandelier hangs overhead, creating a changing array of reflected light. The artist, Ipswich’s George Sherwood, previously partnered with Tower Hill for a kinetic sculpture exhibit in 2019.

Beginning Feb. 18, the botanic garden will host “Orchids After Dark” on five consecutive Fridays. It’s an opportunity to explore the exhibition after hours, with a cash bar (tickets include one free drink) and jazz bands playing traditional New Orleans style, Latin, and more.



Suzanne Hauerstein, coordinator of volunteer and intern services at Tower Hill Botanic Garden, works on an art piece for the upcoming show, "Prismatic, an Orchid Exhibition." JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Since the arrival of Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton almost five years ago, the nonprofit botanic garden has expanded its scope through outreach efforts, capital improvements, and crowd-pleasing exhibits like "Prismatic." Last year, the garden paired orchids with murals and graffiti-style art by a Worcester artist who calls himself Croc.

In April, Elton will cut the ribbon on the Ramble, a new, naturalistic playground built on the hillside overlooking the main building. This summer, Tower Hill will resume its popular Thursday evening live music series, with a beer garden in the courtyard.

There are 170 acres in all at Tower Hill, including 2 miles of walking trails and 26 acres recently acquired just over the ridge from the new playground. In the spring, the meadow to the west of the conservatories will bloom with thousands of daffodils.

“There’s a lot of potential to grow more and connect more with the community,” Elton said.



A gardner works on a tower that will hold plants interspersed with orchids at Tower Hill Botanic Garden. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Founded in 1842, the Worcester County Horticultural Society presented annual exhibitions in the city for over a century. In the mid-1980s, the organization broke ground on the botanic garden, on the site of a 300-year-old family farm. Today, the garden hosts a full schedule of educational programming and private functions, including conferences and weddings.

The pandemic has brought increased foot traffic, Elton said, with visitors seeking the open air and an escape into the beauty of the natural world.

At the moment, it’s the orchids that are the main attraction.

“Generally speaking, orchids seem to drive people crazy,” as Orlean wrote in the original New Yorker article that led to her best-selling book, “The Orchid Thief.” “Something

about the form of an orchid makes it seem almost more like a creature than a flower.”



Orchids are seen at Tower Hill Botanic Garden. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

As visitors enter the main building, they are greeted with an old Latin inscription: *Festina Lente*. It means “make haste slowly.”

According to Tower Hill’s mission statement, the goal is to inspire visitors and encourage a renewed sense of appreciation for nature. In the modern world, those are invitations to remember to slow down, at least for an hour or two.

But while the pandemic persists, visitors (including Tower Hill members) are being asked to reserve tickets in advance online. The staff expects the new orchid exhibition to be a popular draw.

In other words, *festina lente*.

“Prismatic, An Orchid Exhibition” runs through March 20 at Tower Hill Botanic Garden, 11 French Drive, Boylston. All visitors must be masked. Tickets are \$6-16. For more information and tickets, visit towerhillbg.org.

James Sullivan can be reached at jamesgsullivan@gmail.com. Follow him on Twitter [@sullivanjames](https://twitter.com/sullivanjames).



The orchids at Tower Hill come in all shapes and sizes. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

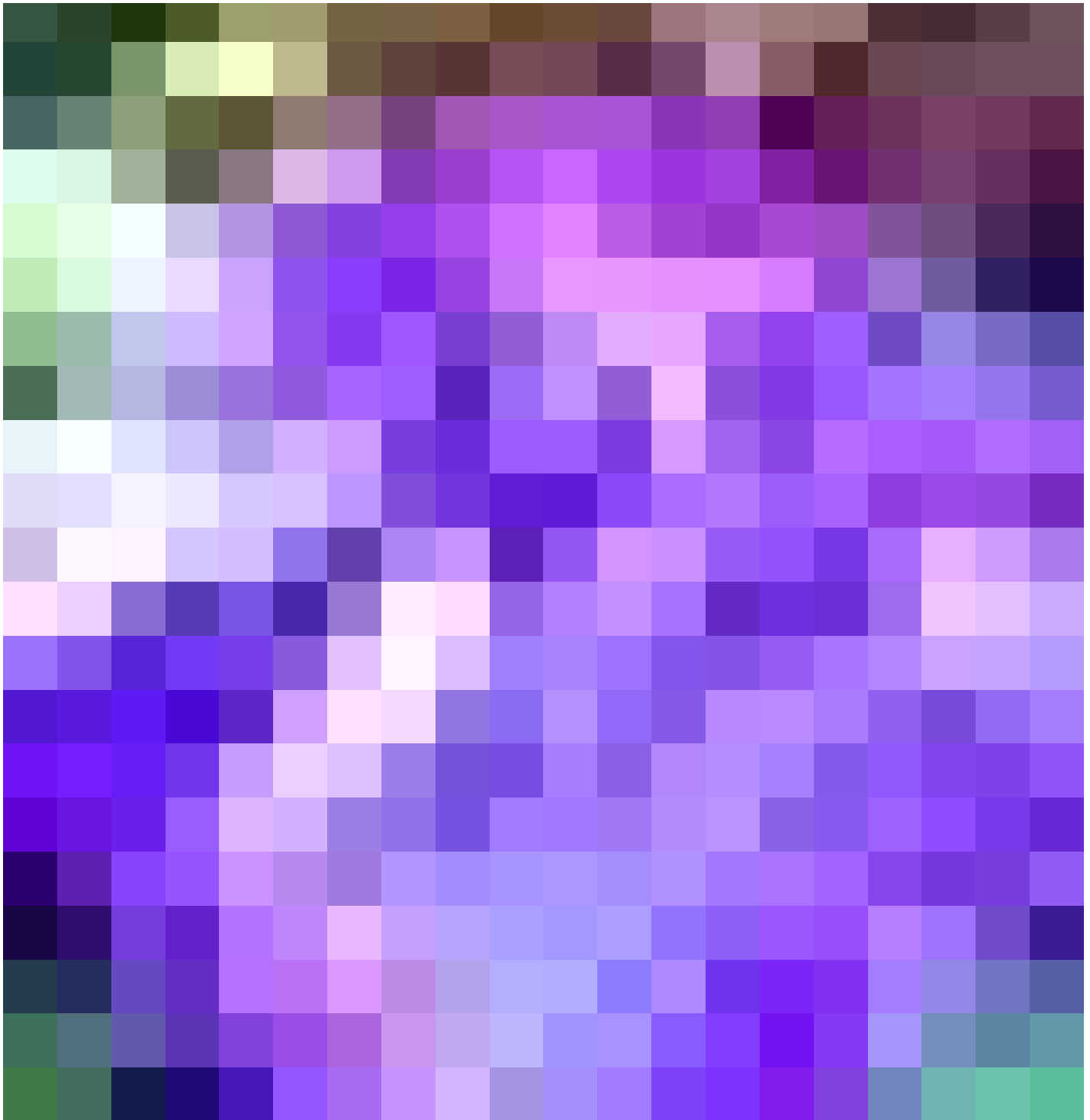


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Orchids are photographed through decorative lights at Tower Hill Botanic Garden. "Prismatic, an Orchid Exhibition" celebrates the interplay of color and light with dazzling plant displays and vibrant art installations. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

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