

COLUMNS

Connell Sanders: A case of orchid Fever at New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill

Sarah Connell Sanders Special to Worcester Magazine

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The New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill's chief executive officer Grace Elton led me through the bustling Orangerie last weekend; the aroma of blooming orchids hung heavy in the air. "This one smells like chocolate," she said, indicating a vibrant Sharry Baby with spiky, brick-red blossoms. As I crouched down for a closer look, the sweet fragrance hit me like a steaming mug of cocoa.

My fascination with orchids began at age 10, when I would visit a school friend's house to do homework and watch her father tend to his exotic greenhouse from the safety of the sun porch. The delicate plants were too "temperamental" for children to come near, making them that much more tempting.

In 11th grade, I read Susan Orlean's "The Orchid Thief" for Advanced Placement English class. The bestseller recounted Orlean's encounter with an orchid-obsessed Floridian who was missing all his front teeth. According to Orlean, orchid-collecting began in Victorian England as a hobby for the very rich and grew into an addictive mania known as "orchidelirium."

The Allure Orchid Exhibition attracted deep crowds of afflicted visitors, including my infant daughter, who was nestled in her stroller, awestruck by the electrifying colors. This year's show includes the work of West Coast sculptor, Kara Walker; a sold-out series of "Orchids After Dark" jazz nights; youth programming opportunities over school vacation, and a culminating plant sale on March 31.

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A violinist played softly from the archway and I perused the official guidebook, searching for the chocolate-scented Sharry Baby that Grace had shown me earlier. Despite my hesitation to care for such a delicate plant, Sharry Baby varieties promised to be "Easy to Moderate."

The guide instructed owners to simply keep the plant in bright, indirect light, at a temperature of 55 degrees Fahrenheit at night and 85 degrees Fahrenheit by day, with 60% humidity and a potted mix of lava rock and bark. I began to wonder what kind of care the "difficult" plants might demand from their owners, but my daughter's admiring coos interrupted my train of thought.

Her high praise crescendoed; I lifted her into my arms below a trellis of white and purple petals. I suspected a tinge of orchidelirium was creeping in. "How hard could an orchid be compared to you?" I asked the smiling girl, shifting her to my hip and reaching for my phone. I punched the date of the orchid sale into the calendar app and set an alert for March 31. We would have to see.

Sarah Connell Sanders is a regular columnist for Worcester Magazine. Follow her on Instagram @sarah_connell.