

100 YEARS OF ORCHIDS



• Lee Fennell inspects an early orchid culture experimental flask (circa 1927)

ONE CENTURY AND FOUR GENERATIONS LATER ...

by: Nicki Liggett

Honoring the past by continuing to stride boldly into the future with characteristic innovation and excellence, the Fennell Orchid Company is celebrating its centennial with panache! Their one hundredth year began with a 'grand slam' at the Miami International Orchid Show in March by capturing **The Blue Ribbon**, first place in the open and largest class in the show; **American Orchid Society Show Trophy** for the best overall exhibit in the show and **SFOS Award for Artistic Merit** given to the most artistic regardless of class. This is fitting for a pace setter in the orchid industry accustomed to years of winning awards world wide.

A certain harmony is exemplified by the present generations of Fennells introducing new hybrids such as Lc. Fennell's Centennial in 1988 while hybrids created in 1901 by the founder still thrive at Orchid Jungle in Homestead, Florida. This enduring quality pervades the company as it remains true to Lee A. Fennell's avocation cum vocation of introducing people to the pleasures of orchid growing. "We built our reputation on teaching people how to grow orchids --- we'll continue to follow that path" says Tom Fennell III, Vice President and General Manager. With his father Thomas A. Fennell, Jr., as Company President, FOC has expanded dramatically in the past two decades. They now develop tissue culture laboratories for other professionals and provide in-house technical services for flower and foliage producers in the U.S., South America and the Caribbean. As founders of one of the first mail order orchid businesses, the family and their competent staff cater to the needs of the hobbyist as diligently as to those of their commercial accounts. From frantic calls asking aid for an enthusiast's ailing orchid to delivering an exquisite plant in full bloom any day of the year, help is but a phone call away.

The oldest commercial orchid grower in the U.S., FOC came about by chance. In 1887 Lee Fennell of Cynthiana, Kentucky was sent to Mexico by his doctors to revitalize his health. Lee's mother had a conservatory attached to her home which supplied her with cut flowers. She cultivated roses all year in an unheated glass covered rose pit and boasted some of the first orchids in North America, probably gifts from missionary friends. Astounded by the novel tropical flora he found in Mexico, Lee shipped large quantities of orchids and bromeliads home. Under his care they not only survived but flourished. The Fennell Orchid Company was founded.

As orchids had been identified only decades earlier there was scant literature on the subject and less on hybrids. Inspired by the minimal information he received, Lee was not satisfied to collect new species on repeated trips to Central and South America. He undertook creating new hybrids from seeds becoming one of the first in the U.S. to do such research. He noted seedlings in the wild often grew among the roots of mature plants and on mossy or decaying logs. The "root method" was minimally successful; however, in 1901 a mossy log under a bench in one of his Cattleya houses did provide his first three triumphs. Novel in that all three seed capsules were set on one plant, Lee simultaneously germinated crosses of *B. glauca* with *C. aurantiaca*, *C. skinneri* and a nearly white form of *C. triane*, thus creating Bc. Daffodil, Bc. Rose and Bc. Orpheus which he called "Pearl". Today, eighty seven years later several clones of these first Fennell crosses still bloom at Orchid Jungle having been tended by four generations of the family.

Cut flowers were requisite at social functions at the turn of the century and it wasn't long before orchids became the quintessential flower for many occasions. Lee built a thriving wholesale/retail business which by 1914 had outgrown the facilities in Cynthiana. He moved the operation to a 5 acre nursery, greenhouse and florist shop complex in Lexington, Ky. Mary, Lee's wife, oversaw the flower shop and office allowing Lee to devote his time to the plants.



• An interior view of the cattleya cultivating greenhouse in Kentucky (1914)

Mary set a precedent for Fennell women and the business world by being an integral part of management decades before women's rights were initiated. Lee's social conscience concerned not only women but also ecology. He was a devoted environmentalist who believed all living things should be protected and thrive in a natural habitat. His beliefs and his passion for orchids led him (at the then advanced age of fifty) on an adventure searching for his own private jungle where he could grow his orchids as he found them in nature. His search was concentrated on South Florida, the only

subtropical area in the United States. Leaving Mary to sell the business and move the family, Lee and two sons loaded the orchids on trucks and set off on an arduous journey south. There were few highways in 1922 but Lee persevered eventually finding the perfect jungle-like area or hammock as natives call them. Lee's private orchid preserve became the talk of his Homestead neighbors and once again word was spread about Fennell's amazing orchids. Tourists began flocking to his home when a young Miami Herald reporter wrote a long article on this unique gentleman and his exotic plants. Marjorie Stoneman Douglass had found a kindred spirit in Lee and inadvertently altered the direction of FOC. Lee refused to charge admission as he was satisfied to share what nature provided but his sons saw the potential and convinced him a twenty five cent admission would be beneficial to the growth and maintenance of his collection. The Orchid Jungle, South Florida's oldest tourist attraction was open.

Lee and Mary's son Thomas helped move the family and then he returned to Lexington to teach at the University. There he married Dorothy and in 1926 they moved to the family compound in Homestead. Ironically they began their new life just four months before the greatest hurricane of modern times devastated South Florida. The Orchid Jungle was not spared. All buildings and their homes were destroyed as were many orchids and many of the magnificent trees of the hammock. Undeterred they began rebuilding. Tom and Dorothy turned to farming to supplement the growing family's income.

Lee and Tom were continuing to experiment with hybridizing and seedling culture. Tom followed the early seed culture work of European botanists and revised it into its first commercial applications. His methods of seed culture in a sterile nutrient solution revolutionized the orchid industry.

The Depression didn't spare the FOC. Tom went to work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Plant Introduction Garden at Chapman Field, south of Miami on weekdays. Weekends he worked at the Orchid Jungle and evenings he perfected his laboratory technique. With his lifelong experience in greenhouse culture of rare tropical plants he advanced rapidly and was sent to Beltsville, Maryland to develop and build the National Research Center. Tom continued to do all of the seed planting for his father using his kitchen as his laboratory. This and maintaining his 5,000 plant orchid collection in his home became the basis of the do-it-yourself orchid hobby. A prohibition by the U.S.D.A. which prevented Tom from building a greenhouse became the "necessity" that was the "mother of invention". With the introduction of Tom's windowsill techniques orchids were now in the domain of the average citizen and not limited only to those with access to greenhouses.

In 1939 the U.S.D.A. sent Tom to Haiti as agricultural advisor to the Haitian Government. Tom took advantage of his next ten years based in the Caribbean to collect orchids all over Latin America for the Orchid Jungle. When Lee died in 1941 Mary took over operation of the company. By 1944 the constantly growing business became too much for her so Dorothy and Tom, Jr., a teenager, came up from Haiti to manage FOC. They added their personal collection of orchids to the jungle collection. In 1949 Tom Jr. graduated from Harvard and came to work with the orchids full time. Under their direction the company prospered. Tom Sr. later returned from Latin America to assist with the expansion and to direct public relations. He generated a tremendous flow of articles in national magazines and some of the earliest promotions in the new medium, television. The subsequent boom in the orchid industry in the late fifties can be directly attributed to his innovations. The mail order business began in true Fennell style with a deluge of over 30,000 inquiries thanks to articles by Philip Wylie in the Saturday Evening Post and Reader's Digest. Tom Jr. had introduced Wylie to the joys of orchids and in turn Wylie urged him to write a book for the beginning hobbyist. Published in 1956, **Orchids for Home and Garden** was chosen by the American Librarians Association as one of the forty outstanding books of 1956 from 26,000 titles that year and was the only garden book so chosen in many years. The company's growth has since mirrored the burgeoning industry.



• Emilio Mallo, head grower at the Orchid Jungle inspects the orchids on display every day in our beautiful gallery



• Thomas III poses proudly with his sisters Anita Marie & Trudy Lynn, each are holding an award garnered at the 1988 Miami International Orchid Show

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Seeking to expand their inventory and create a greater variety of hybrids Tom Sr. built a new and larger laboratory for propagating orchids, keeping in the forefront of the orchid seedling industry.

In 1957 Tom Jr. bought out his father's interest, sharing management in partnership with his mother. Dorothy had actively managed FOC with her husband and continued with her son until her retirement in 1967. Together they were active not only in the family business but in the expanding orchid community. They were charter members of the South Florida Orchid Society and continue to be among its most enthusiastic patrons. Dorothy lives next door to the Orchid Jungle and visits the gallery everyday --keeping the generations in touch.

Tom Jr. has devoted many years to the cultivation, exhibition and judging of orchids so it is in keeping with family continuity that his wife Trudy would become an avid enthusiast. An entrepreneur in her own right, she has enhanced FOC with her special style. She proposed, developed and has been the force behind the Orchid Jungle's Patio Gift Shop which has a wide range of gifts and souvenirs and serves as a pleasant beginning and ending to visits at the "Jungle".

Tom Jr. as the third patriarch of the Fennells enjoys working with his son and his staff, sharing the ever evolving Fennell credo of excellence in orchid culture. Together they continue the Fennell dedication to finding and maintaining species and improving hybrids, offering ever more and better plants to the hobbyist.



• Our salesladies Myrna & Linda check the greenhouses daily searching for outstanding blossoms to place in the everchanging gallery display

Current expansion focuses on their dwarf and miniature collection for the home hobbyist while striving to create worthy new directions in orchid breeding for the future. The FOC inventory includes over 12,000 species and hybrids giving the Orchid Jungle visitor an ever changing panorama of one of the largest collections of orchids in the world.

The family's lives continue as a finely woven floral tapestry, each thread complementing the next. Tom, III married Susan Stern in 1980. Susan teaches horticulture related subjects at MDCC and is an active participant at shows and special FOC projects. Their first child, Carl Jeffrey was born this year casting a bright future on the possibilities of a fifth generation of Fennells at Orchid Jungle.

Fennell Orchid Company and today's Fennell families are as deeply involved and excited about orchids as their pioneering ancestors. Surrounded by one hundred years of orchid history, they continue to seek new vistas while sharing their unique heritage with the world. The orchid show at the Orchid Jungle changes daily and the beauty continues into the second century.



• Thomas III assists his grandfather in observing the results of their early tissue culture experiments (circa 1970)

Tom and Trudy's three children grew up at the Orchid Jungle working with the plants and visitors when not at school. By 1972 young Tom, III was at his grandfather's side in the laboratory. Tom III was a seasoned horticulturist beginning his career at the age of six by pulling weeds. He wanted to learn as much as possible from Tom, Sr. who was in the forefront of the orchid meristem culture. He enrolled at Miami Dade Community College and began his education in the pre-biology program. Upon graduating from MDCC he enrolled in the University of Hawaii's Basic Plant Science in Horticulture Program taught by one of the worlds foremost Orchidologists, Dr. Yoneo Sagawa. Tom, III had been corresponding with him for years bonded by their mutual interest in meristem technique and in the use of orchids as a hobby.

In 1976, Tom, III returned with his degree to work with his father full time. Since 1976, they have doubled the greenhouse space to over 100,000 square feet and plan to double that again in the next few years. The lab has expanded to include six full time technicians and is soon opening a satellite laboratory specializing in foliage plant liner production. As director of the Orchid Jungle Laboratory and Managing Director of the FOC Tom, III has added the dimensions of commercial contract work and consulting to the firm.



• Thomas Jr., his mother Dorothy, and son Thomas III stand in front of the coral cottage built after the devastating 1926 hurricane