

Backyard Orchids

In their Nashville greenhouse, the Merkles nurture common and rare plants. By **Gary D. Ford**



Ed and his wife, Lydia, welcome visitors to their greenhouse on weekends. They sell their orchids online.

After sitting all day in the artificial light of a Vanderbilt Medical Center laboratory, Ed Merkle goes home and steps into a sunlit greenhouse in his backyard. There, he works in a warm, green world of orchids—while his dinner grows a little cold.

“He’s often out here. I have to beg him to come and eat,” comments Ed’s wife, Lydia.

Ed, who grows, hybridizes, shows, and sells orchids, may spend up to five hours a night and most weekends in his backyard greenhouse. He often welcomes browsers and buyers to meander among three tiers of plants—from gravel floor to ceiling.

Light-loving plants hang from rafters.

Other orchids sit on slabs of sassafras bark, displayed like natural portraits. Still others thrive on big, round floor buffer pads that Ed converts to serve as mounts.

A Winter Tan In spring, Ed steps into his backyard sea of colors—white, red, yellow, lavender, and Tennessee orange. He and Lydia (“my number one helper,” he calls her) spend hours potting, pruning, watering, and hybridizing. Meanwhile, the sun shines inside, even on cold days. “I keep my tan all winter,” remarks Ed.

Ed’s love of orchids began in college when he grew them in his dormitory room at The University of Tennessee at Martin. Soon after their marriage, the couple moved to the Washington, D.C., area where they “shared an apartment with Ed’s orchids,” Lydia recalls.

When they returned to Tennessee, Lydia yearned for an older, roomier house. Ed searched for a large backyard. They found both in a 1930s bungalow in the Inglewood neighborhood off Gallatin Pike. Here they’ve raised two children, three dogs, and thousands of orchids.

Cool Days, Solar Heat “I bought it for the yard,” Ed says of their housing decision. “She wanted the quaint, old house, but I needed at least 1 acre for a south-facing greenhouse.”

Ed and his son, David, built the 1,000-square-foot greenhouse that is warmed in winter by solar heat. “Even on a cold day, the sun comes in here and it can get up to 95 degrees,” he reports.

On some weekends, the couple, members of the Orchid Society of Middle Tennessee, travels to shows around the South. In 1997, with the first orchid he hybridized, *Doritaenopsis* ‘Pico Lady Ruby,’ Ed swept three Awards of Merit and an Award of Quality from the American Orchid Society. Another, *Phalaenopsis* ‘Jori Moore’ (named for Lydia’s sister), took an additional Award of Quality in 2001.

For the Love of Orchids Today Ed’s orchids range from 1-inch-tall miniatures to 8-foot-tall giants, from common to rare, from new to old. Carefully, as if holding an artifact, Ed lifts one small lady slipper orchid dating to 1890. The Smithsonian Institution gave it to him after he volunteered to work in its orchid collection.

“Some people just get hooked on orchids. We call it a serious addiction,” Lydia remarks, smiling at her husband as the fading sun warms the greenhouse. ●

Merkle’s Orchids: Visitors are welcome during daylight hours on weekends, but please call in advance. Visit www.merklesorchids.com, or call (615) 262-4030.



Orchid Tips From Ed

- Find a place your orchid loves best—somewhere bright, humid, and warm. “Once you get it in a sweet spot, it can stay there for years.”
- Better plants can be a little costly. “Start with something that’s inexpensive and easy to grow.”
- Be bold in your work with orchids. “Don’t worry about killing them. I’ve killed hundreds.”