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At top, Miltoniopsis, also called the pansy orchid; at bottom, a
Cymbidium; above, Paphiopedilum lowii

TOP PHOTO COURTESY MERYL WIEDER; REST
COURTESY HEIDI KIRKPATRICK



At top, artist Suemae Lin Willhite creates paintings of orchids, below, on Shuen paper with watercolors.
COURTESY PHOTOS

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A season famed for triggering displays of native wildflowers, early spring also heralds the arrival of a host of exotic flowers. On the South Coast, March coincides with the blooming of orchids, whose beauty can range from glorious to downright strange.

To celebrate their favorite flowers, local orchid growers established the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show, which will be held March 11-13 at Earl Warren Showgrounds. The expo features eye-popping floral exhibits, fine art, photography and a variety of demonstrations.



The Ventura Palms display showcases a variety of plant life.
RANDALL ROBINSON PHOTO

This year marks the 66th consecutive staging of the show, which makes it the longest running event of its kind in the United States. That pair of sixes led organizers to post historic Route 66 signs — embodying "the spirit of adventure and discovery" — on promotional materials, along with the inevitable tagline: "Get Your Kicks with Orchids!"

The SBIOS is administered by a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing the joy of orchids to the public. To that end, the group has assembled vendors from California and across the nation, as well as from countries in South America, Australia and Asia.

These purveyors share their knowledge and expertise, while offering thousands of blooming orchid plants and supplies for sale. Floral artists will demonstrate the finer points of flower arranging, while workers at the corsage booth gladly sell their miniature masterpieces.

Experts will present demonstrations of orchid care and culture to help home growers keep their prized plants healthy and happy. In addition, Lance Birk, an internationally acclaimed orchid hunter and author known as "the orchid doctor," will be available daily during the show to answer general questions.

In the main exhibit hall, the Santa Barbara Art Association presents a juried show of works by noted California artists working in a variety of media, including watercolors, oils, pastels, acrylics, mixed media, needlework, photography, sculpture, jewelry, glass, ceramics and metalwork. The exhibit also includes a sale of orchid-themed fine art.

A new feature showcases local artist Suemae Lin Willhite demonstrating Chinese brush painting. Ms. Willhite grew up in Taiwan, where her grandfather — an artist famed in his native land — inspired her to practice Chinese calligraphy (also called Japanese Sumi-e painting) several hours a day as a way of life.

"I began my brush painting with my grandfather at 8 years old," said Ms. Willhite, who immigrated to the U.S. in 1975 and teaches art in Santa Barbara City College's Continuing Education program and in her home studio. "I have fond memories of Taiwan. I remember visiting orchid gardens and enjoying the fragrance that is enticing but not overpowering."

Ms. Willhite grows about 30 orchids at her Santa Barbara home and uses many of them as subjects for the work she has exhibited at the Orchid Show during the last three years. When she paints, she begins with the simple form of grass orchids to get her brush strokes flowing.

The "orchid symbolizes grace and elegance in Chinese culture," she said, "and is my favorite painting subject. When I paint an orchid, it is a joyful process, spontaneous movement that signifies the essence of carefree spirit."

Although Ms. Willhite paints a wide variety of orchids, her favorites are Cymbidium, butterfly and Cattaleya. Regardless of the type, she strives to create work that conveys spirit and vitality.

Also on tap at the show is a lavish exhibit created by Ventura Farms around the private orchid collection of David H. Murdock, chairman and CEO of Dole Foods. Designer George Vasquez, whose parents co-founded Zuma Canyon Orchids in Malibu, promises to include eye-catching props among the blossoms to reflect the "Get Your Kicks with Orchids!" theme.

New to the show this year is an orchid exhibit by the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens. Recently, the Huntington acquired the Paphiopedilum orchid collection of the late S. Robert Wertz Jr., a former New York stockbroker and respected amateur orchid grower and breeder in Montecito.

In the early 1900s, Henry E. Huntington himself purchased Cymbidium orchids on a trip to England. With the help of his curator, William Hertrich, Mr. Huntington became the first to grow Cymbidiums outdoors in Southern California, putting the region at the historical heart of orchid breeding in the U.S.

At 6 p.m. March 12, the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden will hold a gala dinner and auction in the main exhibit hall at Earl Warren Showgrounds to benefit the garden's good works. And the weekend of the show, area orchid growers will host rare open houses for adventurous floraphiles.

With somewhere around 30,000 different species blooming on every continent except Antarctica, orchids comprise 10 percent of all flowering plants and constitute one of the most successful plant groups on the planet. The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show offers a dramatic, in-depth look at these wonders, some of the world's most glorious, exotic and sometimes even downright strange blossoms.

IF YOU GO

The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show will take place 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily March 11-13 at Earl Warren Showgrounds, 3400 Calle Real. Daily admission is \$12 general, \$10 students with ID and seniors 65 and older; free to children 12 and younger, accompanied by an adult; \$5 parking. Tickets available at Earl Warren Showgrounds and ticketmaster.com. For more information, call 403-1533 or go to www.sborchidshow.com.

Artist Suemae Lin Willhite will demonstrate Chinese brush painting 1 to 3 p.m. March 12 and 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. March 13. The Santa Barbara Botanic Garden gala dinner and auction will be held 6 p.m. March 12 in the main exhibit hall at Earl Warren Showgrounds. Tickets are \$200. To purchase, call 682-4726, ext. 102. For nursery open house details, visit californiaorchidtrail.com.