

STORIES of New Jersey

Orchids were first imported into this country from England in 1838 by John Wright Boott of Boston. Twenty years later Cornelius Van Voorst of Jersey City had gathered together the finest collection in America. Collectors at Newark and Hoboken in 1873 had notable greenhouses, and at South Amboy the celebrated orchid range of George Such attracted many who were looking for new specimens.

In 1886 William H. De Forrest of Summit became one of the first producers of orchids for the cut-flower markets of this country. About the same period the firm of Pitcher and Manda at Short Hills was outstanding in the field of collecting, cross-breeding and marketing orchids to private collectors. John E. Lager, a native of Sweden, was commissioned by Manda to conduct an orchid-hunting expedition to the Andes Mountains. For three years he traveled the wilderness on foot, in canoe and on burro, facing the dangers of fever, giant snakes, wild beasts and hostile Indian tribes. But he returned with a brilliant collection.

Recognizing the growing demand for cut orchids, Lager, in 1896, went into business with Henry Hurrell in Summit. That same year he was off to South America to hunt orchid plants for his own company. His two-year search through the dangerous, primitive jungles and mountains was rewarded by the discovery of one gold-powdered, red orchid, unknown to botanists. Five hundred miles away, he found others like it. With meticulous care the plants were packed and carried back over hundreds of miles to be shipped to America, but, lost in the confusion of a seaport warehouse, they died. No orchids like them have ever been found again.

Lager's greatest luck came on a trip to Colombia in 1908, when he succeeded in shipping home to Summit the first all-white *Cattleya* of the *Gigas* species ever found in its natural state.

In 1919 the orchid industry suffered a severe set-back when the government established an importation quota of 400 plants a year for each concern. The law also requires fumigation, which usually destroys one-third of the plants and sometimes all of them. At once it became necessary for growers to start on a large scale the long and tedious process of cultivating orchid plants from seeds, which develop only with difficulty and irregularity. In 1922, however, a Cornell University plant physiologist, Dr. Lewis Knudson, discovered a solution, called agar-agar, in which orchid seed would germinate rapidly and regularly.

Quick to take advantage of the new agar solution was Thomas Young of Bound Brook; by 1927 he was the largest grower of orchids in America. Two years later Young sold his greenhouses to large financial interests for \$1,500,000. At the end of six depression years, in 1935, Thomas Young Nurseries, Inc., producing as much as 60 percent of all orchids sold in the United States, could not be purchased for many times that sum, for, in spite of prevailing business conditions, the concern had netted a profit of \$360,000. At last orchids had become "big business."

In New Jersey greenhouses, propagation of orchids is carried on in two ways. In the first--the division process, commonly known as "propagation by back bulbs,"--a cut is made with a sharp knife in the thick, lowest part of the stem of a mature plant. Already grown from the stem, or rhizome, are short, upright growths called "back bulbs," which have lost their ability to flower and