

# THE ORCHID COMMITTEE

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The Orchid Committee holds meetings around the country, working with local orchid societies and assessing more than 200 plants for exhibition award every year. The committee has strong international links and its members represent the committee and the RHS at events all over the world. The RHS is also the International Cultivar Registration Authority for orchid hybrids.

“For over 125 years, the RHS Orchid Committee has encouraged the cultivation of what remains probably the most exotic of plant families – and decided which are among the best. The RHS Orchid Committee celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2014. A strong association between the RHS and orchids goes back much further, almost to its foundation in 1804 (although the first recorded RHS award to an orchid was in 1841, when *Oncidium pulchellum*, now *Tolumnia pulcella*, was given a Certificate of Merit). Then, tropical orchids were only grown by the wealthy and the aristocratic: who among them would have thought that today, moth orchids (*Phalaenopsis* hybrids) would be the world’s most popular and widely grown house plants? At the inaugural meeting of the Orchid Committee in April 1889, RHS President Sir Trevor Lawrence was in the chair. He had a large orchid collection at Burford House, Oxfordshire, and still holds the individual record for the most RHS awards, more than 500.”

Other famous names present were John Dominy of Veitch Nurseries (who flowered the first artificial orchid hybrid, *Calanthe Dominyi*, in 1856), Frederick Sander of orchid nursery Sander & Co of St Albans and Edwin Hill, gardener to Lord Rothschild. At that first meeting, 16 plants were judged: there were two First Class Certificates, one Award of Merit, and three Botanical Certificates. Nursery owner Sir Harry Veitch was elected the Orchid Committee’s first chairman, continuing in the post until 1904. Over the years famous names have been members, including Sir Jeremiah Colman (of mustard fame); Frederick Moore from the Botanic Garden at Glasnevin; and HG Alexander, grower to Sir George Holford at Westonbirt, the longest-serving member ever at 66 years.

The first woman to join was Margot Holmes, in 1931. Currently, committee membership is fixed at 24, and still drawn from broad-based expertise including botanists, amateur growers, nurserymen and plant breeders. In early years the RHS had fortnightly shows in London, so the Orchid Committee sat twice a month. This continued well into the 20th century. Before the New Hall (now Lindley Hall) opened in 1904, meetings were held at various places, including the London Scottish Royal Volunteers’ Drill Hall. From the 1920s, meetings were held in a dedicated Orchid Room at the Lawrence Hall. Now more than half of each year’s meetings are held at orchid shows and events across the UK, occasionally overseas. An important part of the Committee’s work has always been awards. It has assessed some 30,000 orchids during its history (see box, opposite). At first some 200 awards were given annually, more than 30 of them First Class Certificates (FCC); now it is around 70, and FCCs are only awarded once or twice every few years.

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