How to Photograph Show Table Orchids at Your Orchid Club Meetings

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How to turn this

Into this

Over the past year I have been asked many times what kind of set up I use to photograph show table plants at our monthly orchid club meetings. Then another round of twenty questions follows about where do I get this and how do I do that and can I do something else - you get the picture. I love talking about photography and I certainly like sharing the information, and it got me to thinking that there are more than just a handful of clubs of all sorts that might be interested in how to take good shots of images to put online or use in their newsletters.

So, I put together this "How To" presentation. I hope you find it helpful. See my finished results on my flickr link, https://flic.kr/ps/FGRpS.

My Set Up

2- 24" x 72" wire grids hinged together

1 bulb fluorescent light w/ 6' stand

Tripod for camera & remote shutter release (not shown)

1 bulb fluorescent light w/ 1' stand

54" length of 1" PVC pipe (not shown)

42" collapsible circular translucent disc

3 bulb fluorescent light w/ diffuser & 6' stand

52" x 9' black fabric background

6" x 6" x 9" wooden box w/separate black fabric

18" round table 24" tall under fabric

Collapsible rolling rack (not shown)

1. 2 - 24" x 72" wire grids hinged together with 3 grid connectors formed to make a 100° angle. Purchased from a Store Fixture Supplier. see figs. 1 & 2

2. 2 - Single bulb light reflectors using 100 watt daylight spiral bulb from Hardware Store. Attached to a 6' & 1' light stand. see figs. 3 & 4.

3. Collapsible rolling rack, for hanging plants. from Store Fixture Supplier. see fig.5 & 6.

4. 2 - 6' Impact telescoping light stands. Purchased from B&H Photo http://www.bhphotovideo.com. see fig. 7

5. 3 - Bulb light reflector w/ diffuser attached to 6' light stand. From B&H Photo. see fig. 8

6. 4'-5' length of 1" PVC pipe. Slide thru upper front corners of wire grid to hang plants. From hardware. see fig. 9.

7. 18" round table 24" tall. Covered with black fabric to set plant on. Look for one at a discount store or a yard sale. see fig. 10

8. 6"x6"x9" box. Used on table for small plants, cover with black fabric. You could use a pot or plastic crate also. see fig. 11.

9. 42" collapsible translucent disc, is set above the wire grid to diffuse overhead light (typical overhead lighting will tint your pics yellow or blue depending on the kind of bulb). The disc will also reflect your photo light down on plants. Purchase from B&H Photo. see figs. 12 & 13.

10. 52"+ wide, 9' long piece of black fabric. I use fabric design for dresses, it is flat on one side & shiny on the other and has a high percentage of polyester so it does not wrinkle badly. You can pick up a cheap piece of felt from Hobby Lobby if you want, but it attracts lint and dirt and wrinkles badly. fig. 14

11. Remote shutter release. I prefer to shoot at low shutter speeds, so I use a remote release to prevent camera shake. From B&H Photo

12. Camera Tripod. A must, you get the best images, with the richest colors while shooting at low ISO <200. From B&H Photo
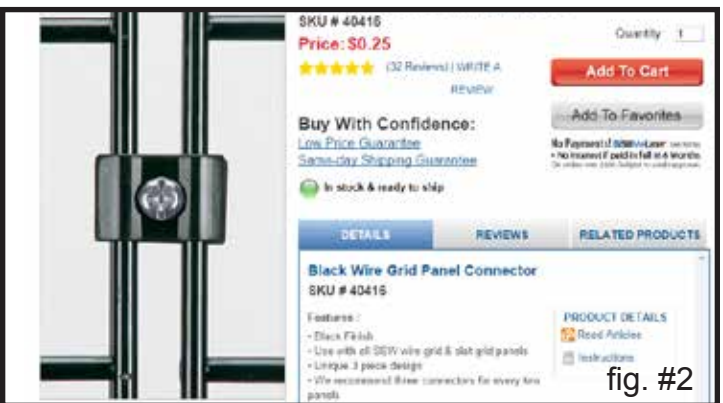

fig. #1

fig. #2

fig. #3

fig. #4

fig. #5

fig. #6

fig. #7

fig. #8

fig. #9

fig. #10

fig. #11

fig. #12

fig. #13

fig. #14

Setting Up the Room:

The picture above was taken just before the crowd arrives for our orchid club meeting. If you will notice in the right corner of the picture, I have my photo station set up (1), just to the left is a closet (2) where I store the wire grid frames that I use for my background structure. To the left of the closet doors is the collapsible rack for hanging orchids (3), and to the left of the rack is the show table (4). While I still have to move plants to the shooting station, and often maneuver between club members, the distance I have to move the plants is at a minimum. To keep plants connected to their names and growers, we have put together a printed label that the grower can fill out when they come to the meeting; or they can download it from the club website (http://www. staugorchidsociety.org/PDF/ShowTableEntriesInteractive.pdf), fill in the information on their computer and print it out at home. I photograph the label before I start shooting the plant, that way I don't have any confusion about matching names with pictures in post production. Plus I don't have to touch and possibly misplace or break the plant tag

Wire grid & collapsible rack were stored in the closet, and the table and box of gear were brought in from the car. Now it's set up time.

Wire grid and table are covered with fabric, lights are all set up, collapsible rack is erected and show table is full of orchids. Time to shoot.

Alternative Set Ups:

   I'm occasionally asked to subtitute for a fellow photographer at a neighboring club and have to bring my set up with me, as that club does not have the ability to store a permanent backdrop on site. The wire grids I normally use are too bulky to carry in the car, so I have put together a collapsible frame made of 1" PVC pipe and fittings. I have several set ups, ones that can be placed on table tops to ones that can be used as a background for an entire exhibit.

   Sometimes I am visiting someone's greenhouse or am in a field situation and I will use a single length of PVC pipe that I slide into a piece of fabric that has a gusset sewn into one end. Using PVC pipe is a cheap, lightweight and very portable method to get those studio like images.

   When you are out in the field lighting is most always a problem, so I like to bring an extra clamp on light and extension cord, a battery operated LED light, and a diffuser/reflector to solve the dilemma.

1. *PVC frame assembled with light and stand*
2. *90° & T fittings used to assemble frame*
3. *PVC pipe slides into gusset of background fabric and is hung over PVC frame*
4. *Box under plant & ready to shoot*
5. *Background broken down & ready to stow*
6. *Temporary background hung from greenhouse structure*
7. *Orchid hanging in front of background*
8. *Stand with additional pot to support awkwardly balanced plants*

Camera settings:

I primarily use a Canon 5D (which is a full framed camera) with a Tamron 28-300 Zoom Lens. My suggested settings will give you a starting point, but you'll have to experiment to find the best settings for your camera. You must wean yourself off the AUTO Mode to get the kind of images you want - not what your camera is willing to give you. My preference is AV or A mode, I use this mode so I can be in charge of what is in focus. The F value will allow you to select how much of the image will be in focus. A low number like 4 will give you a blurred background, while a medium number like 11 will have most of the image in or near focus.

Now how to apply this process. At our orchid club meetings I shoot 2 types of images, 1) **orchid stills** and 2) **people shots**. I use a different setting for each, as listed below.

1. Orchid Stills: As I mentioned earlier I shoot an image of the growers information label before shooting each orchid. First I set the ISO on 200 then set the F on 6.3, slide the exposure compensation to +1/3, and make sure that plenty of light is illuminating the label, make sure it's in focus, then shoot. Next I prepare to shoot the orchid, I set the F on 11, slide the exposure compensation to -2/3, select my focus point and shoot. I will often over or under compensate the exposure to make sure I have a good shot. Next I will zoom in or zoom out or move my camera for a different compostion.

Grower Label Settings	*Orchid Still Settings*	*People Settings*

2. People Shots: I take 2 types of people shots, first general activities shots and secondly portraits. First for general shots I set the ISO on 6400 (use the highest speed you are comfortable with) and the F on 9 and with no exposure compensation. I usually review the first few shots in case I need to make adjustments. You may want to preselect the auto focus point so you get the person of choice in focus - not the plant at the back of the room. We use 'head shots' or portraits in the newsletter and website, so I make a habit of shooting guest speakers as well as members to keep in our people library. I always like to get a good shot of the speaker and find that this can sometimes be very tricky. I plan ahead and save a seat in the front row to be assured of some closeups. I also have some preferred angles pre-selected where I can capture the speaker against a very clean neutral background. Most speakers nowadays give a video presentation so room lighting is dimmed. You have to take maximum advantage when the room lights are on. You only get one chance to get a nice shot so I will take at least 20 to sometimes 50 shots hoping for that one good shot. Remember you don't want to embarass your speaker or member with a goofy portrait.

Other settings: I usually set my camera on AWB (Auto White Balance), but if I'm shooting in weird light I may use another setting. When shooting stills (on a tripod) I set the camera to use a remote shutter release. Remember when you go to shoot people to go back to normal shutter release setting.

Magenta dilemma: The color magenta and dark shades of purple can be difficult if not impossible to capture with some cameras, their sensors just can't read it properly. You can change the light setting to fluorescent or even try a custom setting, adjusting the exposure compensation can also help. In the end you'll just have to live with what your camera will give you.

Hope you found this information helpful. Happy shooting!