



Plant Heritage

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# How a seed of an idea grew into an orchid foundation



! The Mathers Foundation acquired the *Pleione* collection of Ian Butterfield (left) in 2021

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## GILL MATHERS explains the history of the inspirational Mathers Foundation – this year's Brickell Award winner

The Mathers Foundation burst into life in 2019 through the happy meeting of three people whose lives have been dedicated to orchids.

I had been given my first orchid, *Paphiopedilum* *Leyburnense*, as a 21st birthday present. I met David at university and found in him a kindred spirit for whom the critically endangered orchids from Southeast Asia were a passion. At home, our orchid collection, crammed into an urban conservatory, won several awards, including one First Class Certificate from the RHS.

In 2017, Jim Durrant, then of McBean's Orchids, lent his advice to planning a new glasshouse for our collection and agreed to look after our treasured plants while it was being built. Jim was up for a new challenge and using my background as a finance trustee of several local charities we came up with the idea of the Foundation. The plan was simple: to establish a charity to inspire others to grow and conserve orchids for future generations to enjoy.

### DIFFERENT SKILLS

David supplied the initial funding and many specimens from his personal collection. Jim is Sussex born and bred so it was fitting that our Foundation should be based close to some of the famous orchid nurseries of the Victorian era. The site was a test greenhouse being built by Peter Verheul of Hortisystems, encompassing state-of-the-art technology and heated by waste wood chip.

The initial collection came from the world-famous Eric Young Orchid Foundation whose curator and trustees kindly agreed that we could acquire a range of its *Oncidium*, *Miltoniopsis* and

*Cymbidium* hybrids, securing divisions of many of their awarded specimens as insurance against any future disaster.

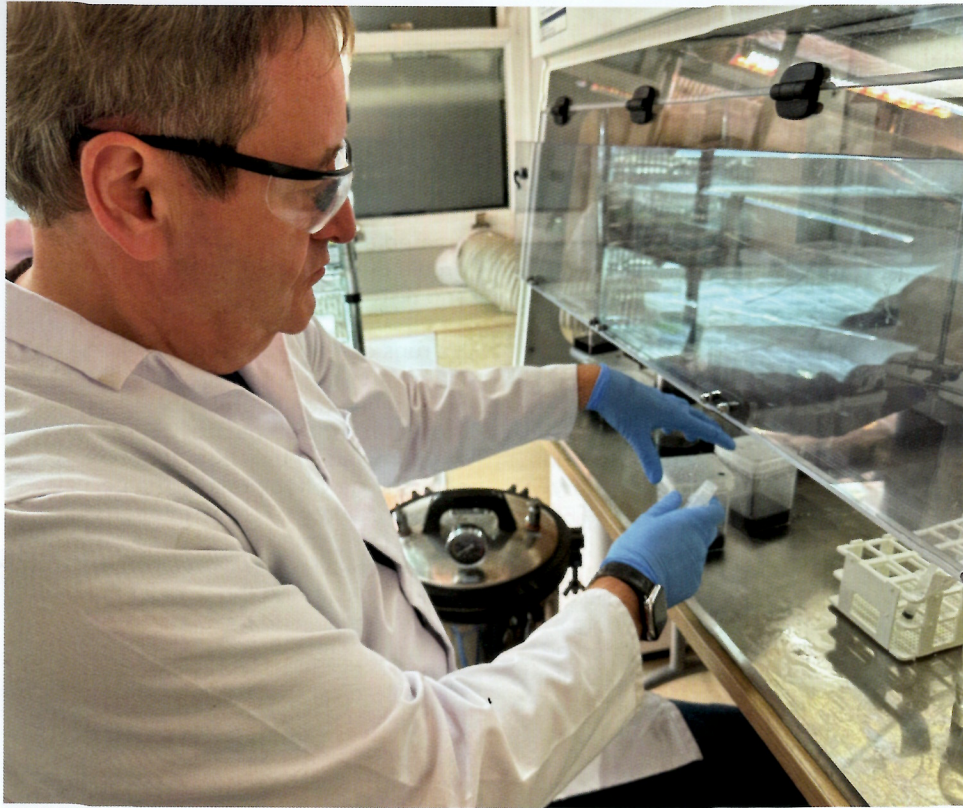
As founders we all bring different skills, but we are united in our desire to be groundbreaking in what we do. David is technology focused and from the start created a digital database, mapping each orchid in the collection with its parents and history.

He runs our laboratory, a fundamental element of the Foundation, creating the next-generation hybrids as well as sibling crosses from our species. David liaises with growers in the UK and overseas, sourcing new additions to the collection and coordinating rescue missions as needed. As a member of the RHS Orchid Committee, David travels to shows and collections around the world, engaging with scientists and growers.



! Jim Durrant hybridising white *Cymbidium*

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David at work at the laminar flow cabinet in the laboratory

**CHAMPION GROWER**

Jim is the lead grower and hybridiser and manages the collection, together with our expert volunteer Hendrelien Peters (formerly of Durban Botanic Gardens). Jim is a champion at trialling new growing methods and always enjoys a challenge. With classical music playing, orchids get repotted and cared for, even ones that are not always his favourites. An expert educator, Jim is a very popular tour guide, many enjoying his sense of humour, while his showman's eye ensures the orchids always look their best.

I enjoy the organisation of making the charity tick whether producing accounts, quarterly updates or taking photos for the social media platforms and articles

spreading the word about the work we do. I complete the regulatory reporting, assist with labelling the collection and produce the catalogues and postcards with information about our plants. Open days are an important part of our mission, as we welcome guests from around the world. I am lucky to have the assistance of Marguerite Marks as my volunteer helper, providing the hospitality.

**TRANSFER RECORDS**

What we hadn't expected was the demand from growers for new homes for their orchids, collected over many years and at risk of being lost. We have tried to take on plants where they



© Johan Hermans

Gill and David on a visit to Madagascar to see orchids in situ in 2023

represent important reference collections of species and hybrids which can be accommodated within our growing conditions.

Such transfers require proper quarantining, research and cataloguing as well as careful horticulture to adapt to their new home. Often, they are accompanied by extensive notes, records and photographs. An ongoing partnership with the previous owners is critical, helping to preserve and transmit knowledge gained over many years. Five years on, the Foundation now looks after more than 17,000 plants including three of the UK's National Plant Collections\*: *Oncidium*, *Pleione* and *Stanhopea* & *Acineta*.

- If you are inspired by our mission, please visit us in 2025. Our guided tours, which run once a month from February to May, can be booked via our website [www.orchid.foundation](http://www.orchid.foundation) when dates are finalised in early autumn.



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Jim Durrant and Gill at the RHS Wisley Garden Show 2023