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Travel

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Innkeeper's passion blooms in Weston, Vt.

By Janet Mendelsohn

Vanilla beans are the seed pods of an orchid. Widely used for food flavoring and cosmetics, the flat-leaved vanilla orchid (*V. planifolia*), grown in Mexico and Madagascar, yields the only industrial product derived from orchids, among the world's most popular plants. I learned this from Bob Aldrich, a former cardiologist turned innkeeper, as we toured his greenhouse.

In the office of The Inn at Weston, run by Aldrich and his wife, Linda, a former cardiac rehabilitation nurse, there's a sign that reads "It's never too late to change what you want to be when you grow up." After 32 years in medical practice, in 2001 they switched gears to pursue their dream of owning a Vermont bed-and-breakfast. They left New Jersey and bought this historic 13-room inn, now also known for its upscale dinners. One of their next moves was to build a greenhouse that now contains nearly 400 orchids. Bob Aldrich says it's one of the largest private collections in the Northeast.



JANET MENDELSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The greenhouse at The Inn at Weston contains hundreds of tropical plants.

Some people talk about the exotic, even erotic, beauty of humidity-loving orchids. Aldrich, who majored in biology before medical school, is interested in their evolution and relationship to other plants. When Linda brought one home from a grocery store in the early 1980s, he began reading about their root systems and became the local orchid nursery's best customer. In Vermont, he finally had space to plunge deeper.

Informative tours are free and open to the public on request. You don't need to be an inn guest. In winter the inn offers guests courses (check website for dates) on growing orchids at home.

In early January, there were few blooming. Aldrich says it's better to come in late February and March, but you will always find some flowering. Orchids are epiphytes, or "air plants," that grow on other things. They can be miniature or very large, potted in mulch or growing on bark, branches, or tree ferns. The greenhouse at first seems a small forest of brown and green leaf textures and shapes. But the more you know, the more you see. He taught me to look for seed pods, new and old growth, and variations in the colors of each six-petal flower. A purple cattleya, despite weeks from flowering, forecast its classic beauty, prized for corsages. A pale violet, loosely branched vanda alliance evoked a leggy hyacinth.