



Hilo Orchid Society Newsletter

April
2026

Date: Sat., April 11, 2026
Time: **1:30** Informal “talk story”
2:00 Meeting starts
Place: Kamana Senior Center,
127 Kamana St., Hilo
Speaker: none
Program: How to Mount Orchids
Workshop

Many orchids are epiphytes, growing naturally on trees, not in the ground. In Hawaii we have a climate where we can grow them outdoors. If you have suitable trees on your property, you can try mounting your orchids on the trees.

But how do you mount orchids? This month, instead of a talk by a speaker, we’re holding a workshop where you can learn how to mount orchids on trees. Eric Guttormsen, who heads our efforts to mount orchids on trees at Hilo’s Pana’ewa Zoo, will lead the workshop.

It’s not just a matter of how to tie them on with string – that’s easy. You need to understand how to choose a good location on the tree (depending on how much sun the orchid needs) and which side of the orchid plant should go up against the tree in order for the orchid roots to attach to the tree. That comes down to understanding how orchid roots grow. Eric will explain it all.

In the workshop, you will be mounting an orchid seedling on a little branch. We will supply the orchid seedling, the branch, and the string to tie it on with. We ask that you bring your own clippers or scissors to cut the string – we don’t have enough scissors for everyone.

Since everyone who attends will get to take home a free orchid seedling that they mounted, we will not have opportunity plants at this meeting. We will still have a Show and Tell table and a silent auction.



A Cattleya that Rick Kelley mounted and grew on a tree

See Orchids Growing on Trees

If you attend the workshop on April 11, you are invited to visit the property of Rick Kelley the next day, April 12, to see the orchids that Rick has mounted on trees. See page 5 for directions.

If you plan to visit Rick, we ask that you tell us via email at hiloorchidsociety@gmail.com, or you can call Kathy Gollaher at 808-937-2583, so we know how many people to expect.

Akatsuka Spring Sale

Akatsuka Orchid Gardens is holding their Spring Sale from April 9 to April 16. They sell a variety of orchids: Cattleyas, Dendrobiums and much more. Akatsuka is located at 11-3051 Volcano Rd. (Rt 11) on the left side before you reach the town of Volcano.

Orchid Stories

The Scent of Scandal



Phragmipedium kovachii 'Okika', grown by Glen Barfield.

The orchid world is a small one. Craig Pittman wrote a book called *The Scent of Scandal: Greed, Betrayal, and the World's Most Beautiful Orchid*. It recounts a story of orchid smuggling, orchid scientists who were deadly rivals, and a federal investigation which ruined reputations and gutted one of the world's premier institutions for orchid identification, the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida (henceforth referred to as Selby). Whether the orchid involved is actually the "world's most beautiful" is a matter of opinion, but there's no doubt that it caused the biggest disturbance in the world of orchids within my lifetime.

And the thing is, I knew the protagonists on both sides of the issue! I knew the late Eric Christenson when he was a grad student at the University of Connecticut. I was in the

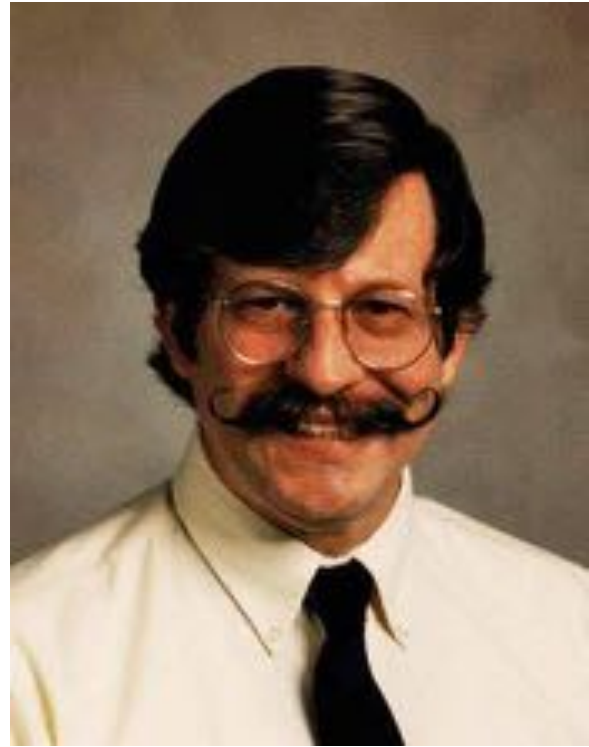
Connecticut Orchid Society at the time, as was Eric, before he went on to become one of the world's foremost orchid taxonomists.

And although I didn't know Wesley Higgins, the head taxonomist at Selby, quite as well, he did sleep in my bed. (My guest bed – get your mind out of the gutter!) He stayed overnight at my house when he was a speaker at the Connecticut Orchid Society. I made the mistake of asking him if he knew Eric (this was before the events in the book happened), and received a "yes" so frosty that it could have halted global warming. So I didn't pursue the subject.

Eric was portly and bearded, a great bear of a man. Wes was trim and sported an eccentric big handlebar mustache that looked like it came straight out of the 1890s. Eric was brilliant but unforgiving and had a history of feuding with colleagues. In



Eric Christenson



Wesley Higgins

particular, Eric had worked at Selby in the past but had feuded with them and left.

There were many disagreements, but among them, Eric accused other Selby scientists of ethical lapses. In any case, after Eric left, there was no love lost between him and the Selby crew. They hated each other.

In 2002, word was circulating about a magnificent new *Phragmipedium* discovered in Peru, with huge (7" wide) bright pink-purple flowers. This was the biggest orchid find in decades, maybe the biggest of the century. Any taxonomist worth his salt would want to be the one to describe and name it. But there was an additional factor at work. The scientific rule for naming a species is that the name published first wins; any later publication doesn't count. So this wasn't just a competition to name the new orchid – it was a race.

But there was one big obstacle – CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. CITES is an international treaty that the U.S. has signed, so it has the force of law. It restricts or prohibits importing certain species. In

particular, all slipper orchids, including *Paphiopedilums* and *Phragmipediums*, are on the most-restricted list. Since the new orchid was in Peru, and the scientists were in the U.S., and it was illegal to import the orchid, how could a scientist do the examination and illustration of the flower that is required for a scientific description?

Eric solved the problem in an ethical way. He found a scientist in Peru to collaborate with who had access to the flower. Eric wrote up the official description, naming the flower *Phragmipedium peruvianum* after its country of origin and to honor his Peruvian colleagues, and submitted the article to the American Orchid Society's magazine *Orchids*, where it was scheduled to be published in the July 2002 issue, to be mailed out on June 17.

Meanwhile, there was dirty work afoot. Enter Michael Kovach, an amateur orchid grower from Virginia who was trying to set up a small mail-order orchid business. He comes off in the book not so much as a villain, but as a bumbler who got out of his

depth. He became friends with Lee Moore, a smuggler of orchids and pre-Columbian artifacts. On an orchid-collecting trip to Peru in May 2002, Kovach came upon a native selling the fabulous new orchid and acquired a few plants. He confessed to Moore that he would love to have the orchid named after himself. Moore told him what to do: smuggle the orchid into the U.S. "Take the God-damned f**king thing up there to Selby. If you try for a permit, you'll never get a permit."

So Kovach wrapped the orchid in newspaper and hid it in a suitcase with his dirty laundry. He was waved through customs with no problem. On June 5, he showed up at Selby with the flower. Wes Higgins and the other scientists there were intoxicated with the sudden prospect of being able to win the race to describe the fabulous orchid. Kovach asked them to name it after him, and they agreed. Kovach headed home to Virginia. The Selby scientists worked through the night on the scientific description and illustration.

Eric Christenson's later comments on the event revealed his contempt for the Selby staff. "These people are idiots," he said. "Everyone involved knew it was illegal."

In the succeeding days, it became clear, if it wasn't already, that the orchid had been imported illegally. The crucial CITES permit was missing. The Selby staff argued over what to do, but they managed to convince themselves that it would be OK to go ahead and publish. A special unscheduled supplement of their journal *Selbyana* was printed for the express purpose of beating Eric's description in *Orchids* magazine, which they knew would be mailed on June 17. The *Selbyana* supplement was mailed on June 12, naming the orchid *Phragmipedium kovachii* and beating Eric by five days.

Then things started to fall apart. Here I can only gloss over the subsequent events. The Peruvian government officially complained to the United States government.

The U.S. government launched a Federal investigation and grand jury probe. Kovach was convicted and paid a small fine. Selby and Wes Higgins pleaded guilty to receiving and possessing the orchid illegally. It looked like Selby got off with a slap on the wrist (a \$5000 fine), but their reputation was damaged, and their fund-raising dried up as donors stopped giving. They fired their CEO, who ironically had had almost no part in the affair.

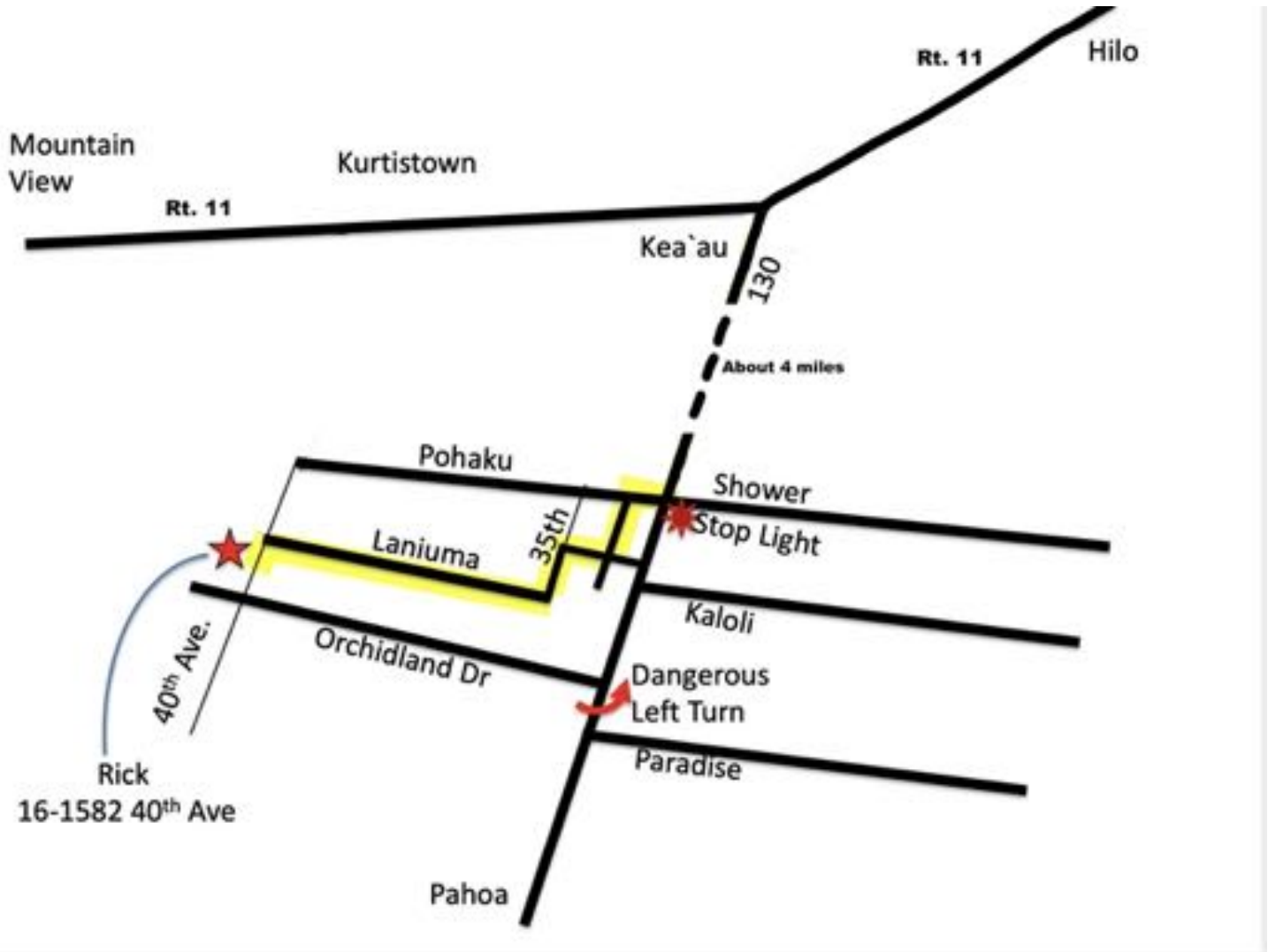
Wes Higgins got a \$2000 fine and 6 months of house arrest, but the real bombshell came in 2009 when the new Selby CEO laid him off, along with the other scientists, to save money. After losing its scientists, Selby could no longer function as an orchid identification center. Higgins found that no employer would hire him, since he had been convicted of a Federal crime. In the years since, he seems to have recovered his reputation. He is a prolific author of books and articles on orchids, and he is on the Editorial Board of *Orchids* magazine.

Eric Christenson may have been vindicated, but his fate was worse. In April 2011 he died at home, alone and unnoticed. He was 57. His legacy consists of the orchids that he studied and named, and some species and a genus (*Christensonia*) that other scientists had named in his honor.

And what about the scandalous orchid? At the urging of the Peruvian government, the Federal court ordered Selby to petition the scientific authorities to have the orchid's name changed to *Phragmipedium peruvianum*, which would have been its name if Selby hadn't published first with the illegal plant. The petition was denied. The rules of science don't care about governments or Federal judges. The rule is, the first published name wins. So, right or wrong, the orchid will forever be called *Phragmipedium kovachii*, a name that will live in orchid infamy.

Larry Kuekes

Directions to Rick Kelley



Note: those who attend the April 11 HOS meeting are invited to visit Rick Kelley's property on April 12. If you plan to visit Rick, please let us know by sending an email to hiloorchidsociety@gmail.com or call Kathy Gollaher at 808-937-2583.

Directions: From Route 11 in Keaau, turn south on Route 130. After about 6 miles, turn right on Orchidland Drive. Head uphill and turn right on 40th Ave. Rick's house is on the left.

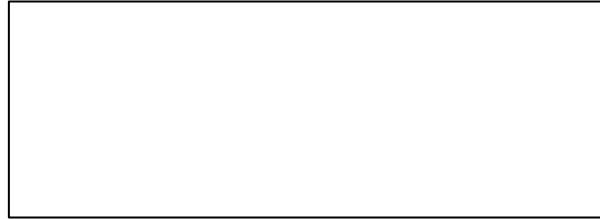
Note: when you return, do not go back down Orchidland Drive, because it is almost impossible to make a left turn on Rt. 130. Instead, follow the route marked in yellow, which lets you turn onto Rt. 130 at a traffic light.

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