

CORRECTION - PSEUDOVANILLA FOLIATA

In Newsletter 25 I reported that the *Pseudovanilla foliata* had reached 4.6 metres by the 24th November. I must have used a fisherman's stretchy tape, as next time I measured it the tape read 3.15 metres, and I double checked it that time.

As soon as the pink tip reached the light it stopped growing, but the stem itself grew thicker and greened gradually down till about 1M above the ground. In January I suspected that the tip had suffered damage, then I sadly watched as the green stem turned brown and desiccated. RIP I wrote in my records. The original log has imploded and there is only a small patch of viable looking roots visible. I shall continue to monitor the situation, more in hope than expectation.

STUDY GROUP LEADERS ARE PEOPLE TOO

Just as orchids react to a bit of TLC, study group leaders need some encouragement too. Now we don't want fertiliser, artificial or natural, but we would feel our efforts were not altogether wasted if our existence were acknowledged occasionally in ASGAP and State publications. We have to wonder whether our newsletters are read by Study Group Coordinators, editors, etc. We aren't looking for personal recognition. We firmly believe that Australian indigenous orchids still have some secrets to divulge and amateur explorers and growers are the most likely medium for extracting such secrets. Study groups were created for this very reason, but if ASGAP and State coordinators can't read the newsletters and find something to pass on to members, something which might encourage interested people to seek active membership in a study group, then we have to question the worth, to others, of our efforts. In spite of protests, some editors had our address incorrect for years causing us hassles at the P.O. and now after nearly four years our own State Bulletin has Don's name again as Len. Our local orchid groups work well, are very interesting and most rewarding, and we would love to see others have the same experience; hence our involvement. If Study Group Coordinators have any practical advice for us, we are receptive.

SEEDLINGS

Because of the almost constant rain, (over 200" in less than six months!) my plants have been rather neglected this year, and bad insect damage has discouraged me. It was therefore with great excitement that I discovered quite a few seedlings appearing, mostly on the roots of larger plants. As I have so many species seeding freely it is impossible (for me) to be sure what they all are, and I love watching developments and guessing what treasures are in store. After a few cooler nights the leaf mass on some host trees has thinned, and it was a tremendous thrill to discover a plant which must be a year or two old. I believe it is a *Robiquetia gracilistipes*, of which I have quite a few, or perhaps a *Thrixspermum platystachys*. I'll be happy with either.

DENDROBIUM BIGIBBUM

"Cooktown Orchid" Queensland's Floral Emblem. By Mary Gandini, Chairman, Cairns Branch SGAP. (from Cairns SGAP newsletter, May 1999)

The Queensland Herbarium recognises one species only and treats the different morphologies as varieties.

Dendrobium bigibbum grows both epiphytically and lithophytically and has pseudobulbs to 1.2 m long, with 3 - 5 narrow ovate leaves on the upper third. Racemes bear up to 20 white to purple flowers.

From the northern and western parts of Cape York come the variety *Dendrobium bigibbum* var *bigibbum*. It is easily recognised by the white patch on the labellum. *Dendrobium bigibbum* var *superbum* comes from the southern parts of the Peninsula. As the name suggests it has large flowers. Just north of Cairns, the variety *Dendrobium bigibbum* var *compactum* prefers to grow on rocks. This variety has small pseudobulbs and flowers. Their natural distribution indicates that these orchids are monsoonal in requirements, i.e., they like a wet season followed by a dry period. All of the varieties will grow very well on trees in the garden in North Queensland.

This year the Cookies have been making a wonderful display on the trees in my garden for several weeks and this is the best they have been for years. Not one flower has been eaten by the ubiquitous caterpillar that usually makes a mess of the first flowers. I have not even seen the little white eggs. Why? Two suggestions come to mind. The first is that we have had huge quantities of rain and it started early this year. The second is that the fruit fly blocks that we all had in our gardens may have broken the moth's life cycle. Well, the blocks have been gone for some time and they were in place last year and so were the caterpillars. Spraying was not done because it was always raining, or "going to".

Although they have been heavily collected, there are still plenty of these orchids to be seen naturally. The criteria are that you must go off the beaten track, be a good bush-walker and rock-climber, and not get lost. Plants are easily propagated from an aerial growth or keiki (means baby in Hawaii). Keikis are produced from the apical nodes and are vegetative shoots with roots that can be easily detached when sufficiently developed. Of course, the orchid experts tissue culture, self cross breed and hybridise plants to produce superior flowers, and many new creations are grown from seed thus formed. In nature *Dendrobium bigibbum* crosses with *Dendrobium discolor* to produce plants intermediate between the parents. Two crosses are *D. x vinicolor* and *D. x superbiens*.

Over to Don: A note on the above - I think I know where Mary's bugs have gone: they've all come down to our place! We didn't really get a dry season last year, and the Cookies are responding by simply not flowering here. The few that did try were swamped by various predators as usual, and we had just one spray of about five beautiful flowers. In contrast, in Babinda, only 12 km away, the Cookies, growing on garden palms, are presently flowering beautifully with up to twenty flowers per plant. The difference is that we are almost encircled by rainforest, and the town gardens are further away from this wonderful storehouse of voracious insects. We concluded some

years ago that Cookies are not suitable for our place, but their continued success in town encourages us to keep on trying. As Mary writes, spraying is very difficult in a climate of constant rainfall.

The North Queensland Orchid Society had a display at Kmart shopping centre in Cairns last month, and demonstrated their customary courage in exposing their gorgeously blooming plants to several days and nights of dry air-conditioning. The quality of the plants shown by these enthusiasts is really stunning. They even get such cool weather orchids as *Paphiopedilums* to flower in Cairns' heat and humidity. I was particularly pleased to note that the Champion Orchid of the Show this year was a *Dendrobium bigibbum*, as well as being Champion Native. This is one of the 'new creations' mentioned by Mary, grown by a Cairns orchidist, and named *Dendrobium* "Ithacola Timberlea". I counted, on one plant, 20 inflorescences, each with about ten flowers, some yet to come, and all in top condition. Wonderful!!

BOOKS

At last we have a copy of *Growing Australian Orchids* by Blombergy and Maloney, as mentioned by Bill Payne in *Australian Plants*, December 1998. Our copy was purchased from Walker's Book Store, Cairns, for \$19.95 and they do mail orders. This is not a big book, not a pretty picture coffee table type of thing, but it does have page after page of gorgeous small colour pictures of flowering orchids to which we can aspire in our orchid growing endeavours. The text is illustrated by excellent black and white drawings by Betty Maloney which amplify the written words perfectly. There is a useful orchid glossary, and a comprehensive index.

Alex Blombergy makes some interesting observations, for example, he prefers to differentiate between the terms "pseudobulb" and "stem", reserving the former term for those that resemble bulbs, and using "stem" for pseudobulbs that look like stems. This seems eminently sensible to me, particularly when he instances the stems on, for instance, *Dendrobium discolor* that can be two metres in length. To claim that they resemble a bulb is stretching our botanical imaginations just a bit too far.

Blombergy also explains most succinctly the reason for some *Dendrobia* being re-taxed as *Dockrillia*: basically, the labellum in *Dockrillia* flowers is uppermost, whilst in *Dendrobium* it is in the lower position. I've over simplified it a bit, but Blombergy explains it very well.

He also explains something that had mystified me for some time: Some rainforest trees are obviously very good epiphyte hosts, and large trees such as Johnstone River Hardwood (*Backhousia bancroftii*) generally have the upper trunks covered in *Rhaphidophora*, *Drynaria*, *Platyserium*, *Hoya* and various others, but rarely orchids. This is because the prolific growth of these epiphytes is too dense for the fine orchid seedlings to become established and so, in general, younger trees are better places to look for orchids. There is always an exception to any rule of course, and Johnstone trees are one of the best rainforest hosts for *Cymbidium madidum*, which prefer to make their home in a damp branch angle which may not suit the other plants hosted by the tree.

Apart from the above, there is plenty of clear advice on growing native orchids in Australia, and we recommend this book as excellent value.

Walker's Book Store is one of those places in which it is difficult to make just one purchase. While I was there I also bought a copy of *Orchid growing in the Tropics* published by the Orchid Society of South East Asia, Kangaroo Press, costing \$24.95.

As the name implies, this is not a book for our Southern orchid growers, but for tropical gardeners it is a mine of otherwise unavailable information. The emphasis is of course on what are to us exotics, but the general information can be applied directly to growing our own native orchids in the tropics. Much advice is given, with useful illustrations, on growing orchids in as natural a manner as possible. Tips are given on choosing and buying orchids; a large section is devoted to pests and diseases; and there is a mouth-watering bibliography. The drawback of the book is that I am vastly tempted to run up to Cairns and buy some of those wonderful exotics and give them a try.

ASGAP CONFERENCE, BRISBANE

We decided, after much discussion, not to attend the Conference. We will, however, be looking forward to helping with the post-conference tour to our area, and if there are any orchid enthusiasts in the group we will do our best to look after them. The Cairns and Tableland branches of SGAP have had a number of pre-tour meetings, and on the 6th June we met at Henrietta Creek to check the plants that the tour group will be seeing. Among those present were five of our Study Group members as well as Pauline and myself, and we were pleased to be able to help spot a good range of orchids in the area. Surprisingly, one of the best hosts was an old mango tree growing in solitary splendour in a clearing, and it is very encouraging to see that a tree in a heavily trafficked area can continue to carry such a variety of wild epiphytic plants. The group found just one specimen of a terrestrial orchid, a *Corymborkis veratrifolia*. This may be an offshoot of the large flowering colony we had the pleasure of seeing in the area late last year, along the Nandroya Falls track.

We also found a good number of *Corymborkis* recently at another location altogether, near the top of the Bicton Hill track, at Mission Beach. None was in flower, but one specimen had a good lot of well developed fruit, the first we have seen.

Barbara from Samsonvale writes, 'I am still interested in orchids, especially the darling little terrestrials. They tend to be ignored, overpowered by the larger and more noticeable epiphytes. We are losing lots of the little ones as the Wallum and nearby Eucalypt forest get cleared and developed. It really breaks my heart to see the areas go, and so few people realise that those beautiful little treasures are there.

'In Spring, 1997, the Blue Sun Orchids, *Thelymitra pauciflora*, were more plentiful than we'd ever seen them, in our special place on the Sunshine Coast, at Marcoola. In 1993, I'd "discovered" these acres and acres of wet Wallum, which were being progressively converted into seaside housing. We gained permission to rescue

plants, and for four years had a wonderful time. The area was just south of Coolum Beach, and almost opposite the Maroochy Airport, a bit to the north of it really, and separated from the beach by a belt of littoral vegetation and a low frontal dune. Was National Park

until 1985, when the State Government did a land swap at the request of the then Maroochy Council. It was a criminal act to our Wallum.

'Anyway, we've lost those wonderful *Thelymitra*. Spring 1998 saw buildings going up where they'd been. Several years earlier, a corner block, usually covered with yellow Doubletails, *Diuris chrysantha* (I think) went under the first site office for the development. Progress, it is.'

My turn to comment (P). When I was checking up on *D. chrysantha*, I was interested to see that David Jones says this orchid was first described as recently as 1987, that "it is common in open forests ... and also grows in coastal Wallum" and that "it is easy to grow and attractive when in flower". Many of you would have been studying orchids in 1987 and I reckon there is still a chance that a keen Orchid Study Group member will find an as yet undescribed orchid. Just imagine it!

As for epiphytic orchids being large and noticeable, there are also many very small plants with minute flowers, for example, in the *Taeniophyllum* genus, as mentioned below, and one of my favourites, *Oberonia titania*.

Another letter worth sharing is from a Malanda member about a trip to Carrington Falls, near Atherton, in March.

'The falls were in full flood which was a bonus for the day. Most prolific orchid found there was *Geodorum densiflorum*, just hundreds of them growing in open forest in pretty-well full sun. No flowers at this time, but the 20-25cm plants with distinctly pleated leaves were easily recognised.

'We almost needed a magnifying glass to spot *Taeniophyllum* (probably *muelleri*) on a tree overhanging the creek below the falls. Not a leaf - nothing - just thinnish roots on the branch. On the same tree was another miniature, *Plectorrhiza tridentata*, dangling in the air with just a few roots to anchor it. Plenty of *Dendrobium tetragonum* were there too.

'Further up the creek, growing on rocks, was *Dendrobium lichenastrum* (a very variable species, we were told) also *D. lichenastrum* var *prenticei*, now given full status as *D. prenticei*. Another rock grower was *D. toressae*. What a little honey this one is!! In tight clusters, sort of overlapping each other, with a central channel on almost sparkling leaves that were an attractive reddish colour in sunny spots.

'There was plenty of *Bulbophyllum newportii* and some *B. bowkettiae*. When we found *Dendrobium canaliculatum*, Trevor told us how this species is very variable in colour. He has seen the type form with yellow tipped flowers with purple labellum, a white form with yellow tipped flowers and a form with brown tipped flowers. I find this orchid very hard to keep alive. What is your experience?

A well known North Queensland grower told me that when a slab is collected with the orchid attached, the paper bark loosens and allows too much water to the roots. He is trialing it on an upturned terracotta pot with no growing media whatever. Losses occur even when potted in gravel, quincan, or other perfectly drained material. I thought my cool climate here might not suit it, but he is from a hotter, drier climate and still has problems. To see this orchid in full flower en masse is a most beautiful sight. Has anyone else had difficulties with this little beauty??

'There was also discussion about a plant I had not heard of before, *Acriopsis javanica*, found in the Mossman area. It is easily overlooked, as it is just a tangle of twiggy plant material when seen in the natural habitat. The pseudobulbs are embedded in a tangle of white much-branched aerial roots, resembling a rough-looking bird's nest. It grows on trees with papery bark in exposed positions, and has a much-branched inflorescence from July to October. Another one to add to the try-to-see list!'

I had planned to write a little about insect damage and the above reports on Cookies and *D. canaliculatum* give me just the right lead in.

The first *D. canaliculatum* I bought flowered for a couple of years on a *Melaleuca leucadendron* in spite of insect damage. I used to spray every orchid I had with Malathion or Carbaryl according to the Maidment programme I follow, about once a month, but I got the feeling it attracted more varmits than it killed, so I gave it away. Ant powder was good if it didn't rain. I started to carry a fly swat with me when I fertilised the plants, and took a whack at anything I saw moving. I lost two small seedlings of other species I had tied into trees, and had just about decided that what couldn't beat the predators without my help would just have to succumb. That's when some creature overplayed its hand, and I just couldn't let it get away with it.

One day I discovered a *D. canaliculatum* with its newest leaves eaten off, but I thought it might still flower. I checked the tree at night and saw nothing untoward. Next day half the pseudobulb had been eaten and the following day the whole thing had gone. The creature then transferred its attentions to another *D. canaliculatum* on the same tree. This was a much smaller plant which I feared would not survive similar treatment. A nearby *D. bigibbum* var *superbum* also came under attack. The truce was over. I have since sprayed all new foliage and inflorescences wherever I've found them with Diazanone once a week and if it has rained within two hours of spraying, I have another go. The only creatures I've disturbed have been hairy caterpillars. I seem to be getting a win but how long can I keep it up?