

## Some Notes for Beginners – by Jim Bydie - episode 1 (more next month)

**1. Introduction** - When you first get involved in orchids, there are a number of seemingly large hurdles in front of you. First, most of the orchids we grow are epiphytes, meaning their natural habitat is to grow on the outside surface of a tree, as opposed to garden plants which grow in soil. This means that the fundamentals of culture are quite different. Orchids are not particularly difficult to grow, but even highly experienced gardeners initially find these requirements almost the opposite of their current experiences. Orchid overwatering is often a serious result.

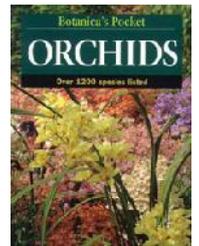
Second, there are the names. Orchid growers use the Latin binomial system of naming more strictly than most gardeners are used to, and there are an awful lot of orchid names. Gardeners may already know thousands of plant names but the orchid family is one of the largest in the plant kingdom with 750 to 1000 natural genera, and around 35,000 naturally occurring species. When you add the man-made hybrids, there would be close to 200,000.

Luckily, you don't need to know anything like this number, but you would be surprised at how many different genera and species people do grow. So how does one go about learning all these new names? Well the answer is slowly and surely, bit by bit. For me, I don't really remember plant names until they mean something to me. I need to know what the plant is, and a bit about it, so that I can link the name to knowledge in my mind. Don't try to learn too much at once. Start with the popular types you see at meetings, or the types that really catch your eye, and in particular, make sure you learn something about the ones that you have already acquired and are trying to grow. Don't be disappointed that you don't know much about them. It's much easier to add knowledge to what you do know, than to learn something from scratch, and your knowledge will expand naturally as you go along. You will add more detail about the ones you know already, and learn about new plants as they interest you and you look them up.

Did you notice there that I said "look them up"? To do that you need the right little book.

**2. Buy a Book** - You don't need a massive Encyclopedia. What you want is a small book that you can carry about with you when you go to meetings and shows. When I started out in orchids, we all used a little paperback called the Golden Guide to orchids. I wore out 3 copies in my first 5 years and still have a battered copy no 4.

The Golden Guide may still be obtainable, but a much better book, and the one I recommend that every new orchid grower buy, is "Botanica's Pocket – Orchids". It is about 14.5cm wide x 20cm tall, x 4cm thick. The second reprint was released not long ago and it should be obtainable in bookshops or eBay for \$25 - \$35. It covers 1200 of the most popular orchid species and has pictures of most of them. It will give you a good insight into what the various types of orchids look like, where they come from, and some cultural information.



**3. So Let's start the ball rolling** – The orchids I think you should learn about first, are the ones you will see in the greatest numbers at meetings, as this tells us that they have a level of popularity among other growers and are widely grown. There is a high chance they will include the orchids you first acquire as a grower.

The groups I suggest you learn about first are: The Cattleya alliance, Dendrobium, the Oncidium alliance, Cymbiums, and to a lesser extent - Paphiopedilum, Coelogyne, and Phalaenopsis. To give you an idea of the popularity of some of these groups, I counted their numbers benched at one of our Societies September meetings. Out of a total 200 orchids benched, there were 55 Cattleya alliance, 40 Dendrobiums, 27 Oncidium alliance, 15 Paphiopedilum, 10 Coelogyne, and 9 Phalaenopsis. In other words, 156 out of 200.

The following provides a little introductory info on the orchids I just mentioned, and please note, I am deliberately using the term 'alliance' in this article to indicate that the orchids in an 'alliance' are closely related and have been interbred to create hybrids. I use the term in a very general sense and it has no official or taxonomic meaning.

**(a) The Cattleya alliance.** These are the orchids that most of the ladies love for their exotic flamboyance. Its species are found in Central and South America. The 5 main genera involved in this 'alliance' are Cattleya, Laelia, Brassavola, Rhyncholaelia, and Sophronitis. They are all compatible in cross breeding, and mankind has crossed them in every possible combination in making hybrids. Of all the many species, the one with the biggest, frilliest, showiest lip is Rhyncholaelia digbyana, which for its first 150 years or so, was known as Brassavola digbyana, and just for the purposes of this article, I am going to regard it still as a Brassavola.

Digbyana has been crossed with all sorts of Cattleyas and Laelias to improve flower size and lip shape and is behind nearly every 'Cattleya' hybrid with a big flamboyant lip. I use the term 'Cattleya' in inverted commas, because technically, any hybrid with digbyana in its background can no longer be called a Cattleya, even if it looks like one.



a "Brassocattleya"

A cross between a Cattleya and a Brassavola is called a Brassocattleya, or BC for short. A cross between a Laelia and a Brassavola is a Brassolaelia or BL for short. Similarly, we have Laeliocattleyas, etc, and when you cross a Brassavola with a Laeliocattleya, you get a Brassolaeliocattleya or BLC for short.

Sophronitis coccinea is a very small plant with relatively large (7cm+) red flowers, and it is this species that has been used to create the red "Cattleya" hybrids, and most of the miniature or compact "Cattleyas". Similar to the Brassavola combinations, we have SC's, SL's, etc. When

there are three of these key alliance genera involved, the trick is to know the order in which you are supposed to express the components of the mixed natural genera, ie SLC as opposed to LSC, but unless you are making the hybrid yourself you really don't need to worry about that. It will be written on the label of the plant you buy.

Unfortunately (or fortunately?), the hybrid register managers eventually agreed that some of these multiple component names were excessively long, and for new combinations, they began to accept generic names based on people's names, but ending in "ara". For example, the mix of the 4 natural genera: Sophronitis, Laelia, Cattleya and Brassavola is called a Potinara and is named after a Monsieur Julien Potin, who had been a President of the Royal Horticultural Society in France. There is no easy way to remember all these commemorative "name" genera, but luckily, Potinara is the only one among the Cattleya alliance that you will strike all that regularly.

The Cattleya alliance plants are fairly easy to grow but they are not for an unroofed shadehouse where they will get cold and wet in Winter. They are gorgeous flowers but apart from Laelia anceps, probably not the group to start with.

**(b) Dendrobium (abbreviation = Den.)** – This is a huge genus. Its 1200 or more species come from India, Asia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Australia, and the Pacific Islands, and it has been highly hybridised. There are many different sub groups within the genus but there are two in particular that I recommend to beginners. The first are the Australian native Dendrobiums in the Dendrobium kingianum/speciosum group (ie section Dendrocoryne).



Den. Bardo Rose

D. Mt Larkham

Den. kingianum (the pink rock orchid) and Den. speciosum (King orchid or rock orchid) and all their hybrids, are hardy evergreen types that grow cool to cold in Sydney. The hybrids are a mixed up lot these days but those with Den kingianum in the background are mostly smallish plants between 10 to 40cm in height, with crowded, slender pseudobulbs, and many 2 to 3cm flowers, usually in the pink tones. They are very hardy, easy to grow, and multiply quickly by making more than one new pseudobulb per lead per year. Good kingianum hybrids flower their heads off, and a plant filling a 15cm pot could carry 100 to 200 flowers. Den speciosum is a much bigger plant that can have straight or curved pseudobulbs up to 4.5cm thick and 60-90cm tall. It has a longer flower spike (40-60cm) and lots of 5cm yellow or white flowers. The hybrid between kingianum and speciosum is called Den. x delicatum and it looks like a robust kingianum. It usually has soft pink flowers but there are also white forms. There are a myriad of hybrids between these two species and others in the Dendrocoryne section, like Den falcorostrum, Den tetragonum, Den. fleckeri, etc, that are all easy to grow and flower. They are all different and desirable and many growers specialize in these lovely Australian natives.

The other Dendrobiums I want to mention are the Indian/Asian Dendrobiums that we collectively call softcanes. The "softcanes" are deciduous orchids, or at least nearly deciduous, as they sometimes hang on to a few leaves during the winter. It is important to note however, that they are not deciduous because of the cold. These orchids evolved in areas that have a very dry winter, a drought that is only broken by the monsoonal rains of the spring season. They drop their leaves to protect themselves from the dry, and as they go almost dormant in the winter, they need to be kept much drier while they are dormant. If you water them heavily through this period you will rot their roots, and instead of flowers in the spring, the buds along the stems may produce baby plantlets as a survival mechanism.



The name 'softcane' refers to the texture of the upright pseudobulbs, which are 40 to 60cm tall, and perhaps 1.5-2cm thick. They are not soft to the point where they are floppy, or such that they squish easily, but they are softish compared to the pseudobulbs of other Dendrobium types. Softcanes flower around October with a fantastic display of 5 to 7cm flowers, in groups of 2 or 3 all along the pseudobulb. The hybrids these days can be white, yellow, pink, mauve, or any combination of these colours. They flower off the two year old canes so don't cut off the old canes too early, but once a cane has flowered, it will not flower again, and only serves the same purpose as would the backbulb on a Cymbidium. That is, a reserve source of energy, and as a connecting tissue between other sections of the plant.

**(c) Coelogyne** – As I am running out of space this month, I will jump to Coelogyne (usually pronounced So-lodge-in-ee), and tell you about the Oncidium alliance next month. There are about 150 species in Coelogyne, and they come from India, Asia, PNG, and the Philippines. Some are hardy, cool growers, but unfortunately others would need a heated glasshouse, so you need to be selective. Having said that though, the ones you can grow easily are beautiful orchids and easily acquired because they are so prolific and multiply well.



If I could mention just 4 cold growers to buy, they would be Coel cristata, C. flaccida, C. Unchained Melody, and C. ovalis. All are shady growers that like to be grown in a basket once they are big enough, and left undisturbed for long periods. The pick of them would be Coel cristata (*pictured left*) which has arching to pendant racemes of up to 10 crystalline white, slightly floppy, 8cm flowers with yellow in the lip. It's pseudobulbs are slightly spaced on a creeping rhizome and when grown in a basket, it is normal for the plant to dangle out over the edges. It is a really lovely orchid.

Coel flaccida has a more conventional growth habit with tightly clustered pseudobulbs that are easily confined to their pot. Its arching to pendant racemes have about 8 flowers that are smaller than cristata at about 4cm. They are cream to white, with yellow and brown in the lip. The hybrid between cristata and flaccida is called Unchained Melody. It looks about intermediate between its parents and is perhaps just a little easier to grow and flower than either. For many years was known incorrectly as Coelogyne intermedia.

Coelogyne ovalis is also a scrambler, like cristata, and also makes a nice specimen. Its cream/brown flowers occur in short groups of 1 or 2, and are not quite as spectacular. However, it is a reliable flowerer and indestructible grower.

**4. Genus Names and Abbreviations** – As I mentioned above, orchid names can be hard to come to grips with when you first start out, especially the abbreviations. Many abbreviations are simple enough, just being the first three letters of the genus name, but that is only helpful if you knew the genus in the first place. For example, you might guess that “Wils.” stood for Wilsonara if you knew what a Wilsonara was. Even if you looked up Wilsonara in your brand new “Brittanicas Pocket Orchids” book, you would be at a loss because a Wilsonara is a man-made hybrid genus (Cochloda x Odontoglossum x Oncidium) and it isn’t in the book. Which leads us to a key point, and that is that it is much easier to find information about the naturally occurring genera than the hybrid genera.

There are published lists of all the genera names, including the hybrid genera, but they are BIG lists. There are many versions available in the internet but the one I found was at [http://www.firstrays.com/orchid\\_genera.htm](http://www.firstrays.com/orchid_genera.htm) It lists the genera alphabetically, gives the official abbreviation, and for the manmade genera it tells you which natural genera are included in its hybrids. It only uses abbreviations for the genera included in the manmade genera but those are easy enough to search on the same list. I can’t publish the list as it is 22 pages, but anyone can print it for themselves.

“Some Notes for beginners” Episode 2 will be in next month’s bulletin.