

Why Grow Species Orchids

By Gary Hart

Species orchids are those orchid plants that are found growing as indigenous plants that have evolved in the wild over the centuries. There are estimated to be in excess of 30 000 species worldwide, making them one of, if not the largest of the flowering plants families. They are found across the world in environments from the tropics to semi-deserts and come in an enormous variety of colours, shapes and forms.

So why should orchid growers keep at least some species orchids in their collections?

Species orchids were first on the scene, with all the approx 100 000 registered hybrids coming from them. If you are a grower who loves a certain genera.. there are species available for you. Therefore *cattleya* growers can also keep some of the original species the modern day hybrids were produced from.

As the biodiversity of the world shrinks. As forests are cleared and plants are lost forever, orchid growers can be instrumental in keeping a plant alive that has taken thousands of years to evolve. If all orchid growers, world wide, kept some species orchids an enormous and irreplaceable gene pool would exist. *Paph delenatii* is a good example of a plant that was down to what was thought at the time to be the last plant until it was propagated and distributed around the world. It is exciting to see it has recently been rediscovered in the wild.

Species orchids are fascinating in their colour, shape and habit. All these features are the result of generations of evolution and adaptation to both an environment and in many cases a specific pollinator. A *stanhopea* flower is the shape it is for a reason, not some weird fluke of nature. Investigating why species orchids are the way they are is a fascinating educational experience. We as growers really should spend more time looking at our plants, I mean really looking at the details of the plant and in particular the flowers we treasure so greatly. They really are fascinating, not just attractive!

Often species orchids are a greater challenge to grow than hybrids, which have the increased benefit of vigour. You have to adapt your conditions to reproduce and maintain an artificial environment similar to their homeland. Species orchids in cultivation are often faced with the dilemma of "adapt or die!" This is a challenge for both plant and grower, but so rewarding when you see them thrive. When species orchids flower for you it is fascinating to imagine the plant growing and appearing in the wild.

There are specialist clubs, Internet sites, and literature on species orchids. This ranges from the most technical to the marvellous coffee table picture books so inviting to the dedicated species lover. There are orchid stamps from around the world, rare and reproduced orchid prints, orchid jewellery.. and the list goes on.

Orchid species collecting is cloaked in the most fascinating stories of adventure, deceit, bravery and intrigue known in the plant world. Edwardian and Victorian English gentry spered some of the greatest collectors of plants (and animals) the world has known. The tales of the plant collectors makes for wonderful reading, and adds a 'romance' to species orchids that excites the imagination to this day.

Worldwide there is a great upsurge of interest in species orchids.

They are the symbols of the old new world, the emblems of countries and the remnants of an untouched world we once all shared As people globally clear the land to live, the flora of countries, like Madagascar for example, are destroyed.never to be replaced. Surely part of our responsibility is to preserve this plant diversity so that our lives, and those of future generations can be enriched forever.

Species orchids offer growers the greatest challenge in a world where plant diversity is shrinking daily. They are the gems our hobby is based on, and the "raw material" for future developments. If you don't already grow species orchids give the idea some thought. You will not regret the experience