

From Sri Lanka to Australia with Allan Alvis

When I lived in Sri Lanka I did not grow any orchids, but became very interested in them when I was about 14 or 15. This was mainly due to the influence of my neighbour Dr Ernest Soysa who had a magnificent collection of orchids. Dr Soysa was President of The Orchid Circle of Ceylon and in later years I learnt that he had an immense knowledge of orchids. He was a prolific writer and contributed to many orchid journals. His collection mainly included Cattleyas, Dendrobiums and Vandas and due to his interest in Dendrobiums he was in constant touch with the late Sir Jeremiah Colman of Gatton Park in England.

I forgot about orchids for a long time until about 1951 when my job took me to the central hills of Sri Lanka. My office was not far from the Botanic Gardens and whenever I had some spare time I would visit the gardens to see their mediocre collection of Vandas, Cattleyas and Dendrobiums. One of the great orchids that I always looked forward to see in flower was *Grammatophyllum scriptum* (Giant Orchid). It was a magnificent specimen measuring metres across. There is also a fine specimen in the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

Just before I married I was posted to the Dry Zone. There I saw an abundance of what is commonly referred to as the Grey Orchid (*Vanda tessellata*). This species is now listed in Schedule 1 of CITES. I used to ride my motor cycle out of town and look up into the huge trees and there would be these beautiful *Vanda tessellata* in flower. I would call upon the native lads to go up the tree and get me a plant or two. Their reward a few cents. Today I would be serving a prison sentence!



I had heard of the rare yellow form of *Vanda tessellata* fma. *lutescens* and I was determined to have a piece of this and told the villagers about it. Whenever I had reports of the sighting of this yellow form I would be off on my motor cycle to ascertain its whereabouts. I would park my motor cycle on the fringe of the jungle and explore the trees in the vicinity until such time as dusk descended or the quiet of the jungle was broken by the deafening noise of trumpeting elephants and I would beat a hasty retreat.

The most common orchid endemic to Sri Lanka would be *Vanda tessellata* but it never featured on the postage stamps of the country. The two orchids that feature on stamps were *Dendrobium macarthiae* (very similar to *Dendrobium pierardii*), commonly known as the Wesak Orchid as it flowers in the month of May and according to the Buddhist Calendar is the month of Wesak. The full moon of the month of Wesak is of special significance to Buddhists as it was in that month the Buddha was born, attained enlightenment and died. The other orchid to feature on a postage stamp was *Phaius wallichii* (Star Orchid). Every home garden did have a plant of *Dendrobium crumenatum* (Pigeon Orchid). A one day wonder with a pleasing fragrance.

In 1965 we migrated to Australia and although I still had an interest in orchids there were other priorities raising a young family and buying a home thus orchids were put on the back burner. Whenever there were orchid shows at the Sydney Town Hall I made it a point to get down to see those wonderful shows. Once we were well entrenched in the country I started to interest myself in orchids and I joined The Orchid Society of New South Wales (OSNSW) and some of the local societies.

About 1981 I was invited by Wally Upton to serve on the OSNSW Committee. My first committee position was Assistant Show Marshal and over the years moved on to more responsible positions. Since then I have always been on Committees.

My biggest appointment was when I was appointed Secretary/Treasurer of the 11th Australian Orchid Conference in 1988 which was staged in three giant marquees in the Sydney Domain. When the Australian Orchid Council awarded OSNSW the honour of holding the Conference in Australia's Bi Centenary year the Society had insufficient funds to undertake such a venture. Thus began the process of fund raising auctions, BBQ's and borrowing from member societies. Some societies were reluctant to lend money, some did with trepidation should they be the loser. OSNSW made a commitment to its member clubs that it would share 33% of the profits with participating societies. The result was that Conference profits were unbelievable. Those societies that loaned us money received nearly 100% on their investment and participating societies received in addition to the prize money for their floor displays a further 10% for each square foot of exhibit area.

I was elected President of OSNSW succeeding Graeme Banks at the same time I was Registrar of Judges. In 1999 we moved to Queensland and brought with me a trailer load of orchids. Coming down the Cunningham Highway Gap passing motorists alerted me that was losing plants from the trailer. I wonder if there are any Cattleyas growing on the Gap!

I joined Queensland Orchid Society and it was not long before Nick Woolley invited me to fill a vacancy on Committee. A few months later I received a frantic call from Nick to say that the Annual General Meeting was on that night and they had no nomination for President. Would you please consider? The rest is history.

Whilst in Sydney I grew Cymbidiums because the climate is most suitable for this genus. However, my love is for the Vandas and Ascocendas as their bright colours and combined with the tessellations make them attractive flowers.

It was indeed a privilege to be associated with the like of Sir John Hall-Best the prime mover in the formation of the Australian Orchid Council. I have been fortunate to have had many fine mentors Frank Slattery, Wally Upton, Les Peaty, Bill Smoothery, Syd Waldie, Doug Symons and Graeme Banks. OSNSW was a far thinking Society and developed and utilised their members talents to serve the Society.

Orchids have given me immense joy, happiness and satisfaction. I have enjoyed many lasting friendships in Australia and abroad as I have had the privilege of judging at the 4th Asia Pacific Orchid Conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand, British Orchid Congress at Gatton Park, Manchester, Honolulu Orchid Society Shows and many AOC Conferences.

The Orchid Society of New South Wales awarded me their Meritorious Service Medal for my contribution to the 11th AOC Conference and on completing my term as President I was elected a Life Member.

