

## *Growing Catasetum*

*With Barry Kable*

Coming from the transport industry after 30 odd years, and buying Peters Glen Shadehouses, I didn't know where I was headed or what I was doing, I just saw it as an opportunity. It became obvious after a while that we needed to put ourselves in front of people that were going to buy the shadehouses. In due course Redlands Orchid Society made approaches to us to build a unit inside a shopping centre for security of their plant sales. So we did that at no cost to the society. The president Des was so grateful that he gave me an orchid and I reckon that what happened was that there was a bug in it that bit me and that's how I got started in orchids. Actually before that when we first started off in the shadehouse business Ann bought one, a Dendrobium, It was hanging up in the shade and after about 12 months I looked at this thing and thought "Good grief no wonder this thing won't grow, its in bark" so I tipped it out and put it in soil thinking it'll grow now. Well it's in orchid heaven.

The orchid that Des gave me was a *Catasetum* growing in sphagnum moss and I did not know anything about them so brought it home put it out the back. I kept watering it and giving it a bit of fertiliser every now and again. This carried on all through



*Ctsm. pileatum x  
Cl. warczewiezii*

winter and then come spring it got new leaves but I really did not know what I was supposed to be doing. Eventually about two years later it happened to send a flower spike out and had a couple of flowers on it. By that time I had joined the Redlands Orchid Society so I took it along to a monthly meeting and put it on the bench to be judged. One of our fellow members came up and said "Baz! What have you done to that orchid? Look at that pseudobulb it's all shrivelled up, it needs a feed and a drink". So I started to acquire some information on what I should be doing. The *Catasetum* is still a favourite genus but you only have about 3 days to get them to a show as the flowers only last about a week. The related *Cynoches* genus flowers last for up to 3 weeks making them a greater chance for the show bench so I'm getting into those a bit. They also are more rewarding in that they can flower within 12 months of taking them from the flask.

Catasetums are heavy feeders, and they like a lot of water. They produce either male or female flowers and this is dependent on their growing environment. The male is the most attractive and consequently the most sort after. If they receive too much light they will produce female flowers. I grow them under 70% and that has Solarweave under that, mainly because I like to control the water that they receive. Having said that, this year I'm going to have one section that is open to the rain to see if there is any difference in their growth. One of the things I have learnt about growing orchids is that if you are going to make changes do some of your plants and leave some unchanged to provide a comparison. This may be after 6 weeks, 6 months, 1 year or even 2 years. During winter water is withheld totally with the exception of an occasional splash of water over the tops of the plants. As the leaves start to discolour at the commencement of winter they are packed close together on the top shelf of the shadehouse where they remain dry. This does not happen all at once but over a period of time, some are still flowering while others have shed leaves. Watering does not commence again until you see the tiny green shoot coming away from the bottom of

the bulb. You have to be really careful now as the sphagnum will be dried into a hard lump. You can do one of two things. You can either put it in a bucket and soak it which is too time consuming for me because I have too many or you just keep watering it every day until the top of the sphag gets wet and you have to be careful about this because if you water it too much the new shoot will rot off. What you are trying to do is get the sphag wet during that first week so you can take it out of that medium and put it in fresh. Once again each plant gets treated separately and is not removed from its winter home until the new shoot appears. In practice most plants produce new shoots over a 2-3 week period.

The potting mix I am using for them is sphagnum and jumbo perlite in a 60% - 40% ratio. The ideal is to replot each year at the start of spring. As soon as the little new growth comes I get them down off the top shelf and replot them. You know the old way of potting with bark where you get the bark and pack it in tightly around the plant. With the sphag and perlite for the catasetums I just put it in loosely, I don't pack it in too tight, only tight enough to hold the last year's bulb. They have a very prolific root system and the roots are quite thick and they need room to get out and spread around the pot. I find this grows them a lot quicker than if they are packed in tight and the roots are struggling to get through the mix.

During spring you need to watch the watering and really wait until the leaves unfurl on that new shoot before you get heavily into watering otherwise you risk damping off the new shoot. Luckily there is a second eye on the bulbs so you may get a second chance. As the weather warms up there are a couple of things you need to watch. You hear at orchid talks that you need to water twice a week or three times a week but this is a general rule only. I could say the same thing about these; water them 3 times a



*Barry with watering system in Brom. House.*

week in the summer time. However what you need to do, particularly if you have different pot sizes is see which ones are drying out more than others and which plants are more advanced than others and water those more often. In other cases you could get very hot 40 degree days and you need to water every day. Where there is extreme heat you may need to water twice a day. Instead of applying the general rule we need to do it on a day by day basis. If it is overcast for 3 - 4 days you may not bother watering at all. It's mainly the weight of the pot and understanding how the plant is growing.

They are really susceptible to red spider mite. This does not become an issue until the weather is fairly warm. There are a couple of things that will keep it at bay a bit; humidity is one, they don't like water and get on the underside of the leaf where they are protected a little. You can see these tiny creatures with a magnifying glass. If you get to them early with a suitable spider mite spray as soon as you see the first spider mites this will kill off the adult mites but will not affect the eggs so you need to spray again in 7 to 10 days. It is necessary to keep watch and repeat the process again in about two months. Most probably 3 sprays during the growing season will be required.

I am experimenting with my fertiliser at the moment. I have been using Horticultural Solutions fertiliser. What I found last year was that when I included a few pellets of a product called 'Organic Extra' while repotting about half way in the mixture it really spurred them along. Then I gave them a top dressing of that. This was followed later on in the season when they were growing well with a few more pellets on top of the mix. I still continued with the soluble fertilizer as well. They love feeding.

The *Catasetum* plants produce long arching flower spikes. They are a bit of work because as the spikes lengthen you have to follow them out in the early stages with wire stakes that are pliable enough to form a nice graceful arch to allow the flowers to be presented in an attractive manner. You could use galvanized wire for this but I've found it's too stiff and becomes discoloured and doesn't look any good. I picked up some bundles of plastic coated wire from Nathan at Formosa Orchids and I found that quite good. I tried high tensile aluminium one year but found that a little bit hard to manage although it's possibly better because it is stronger and supports the spike well. I do grow other genera besides *Catasetums*. I did have a lot of cymbidiums but I'm getting out of them because of the work involved. I also grow slippers, including *Phragmepedium* as well as *Oncidini* and some mini catts. Just lately I have become interested in the *Vanda* and *Ascocendra* alliance. I don't know how I'm going to go with those.

The variation in environment needed to grow the various genera came about by default. Because I added onto my shade house lengthwise another 3 bays, I found then that because they were individual sections I could create different growing environments. By adding more shade or making less shade, some with solar weave some with out, raising or lowering the benching, I have flexible growing conditions. A small fern growing under the bench has helped increase the humidity as have the under bench sprinklers. These come on for 1 minutes every two hours between 8am and 6pm. At present these sprinklers come on all year round but I think this may be keeping the place too damp during the colder months.

As an example of using the different environments; for the paphs I have picked the middle of the whole growing house. I found that it was easier to darken this area as the front section received the morning sun and shaded the middle while the back section received the afternoon sun and shaded the centre.

The phrags did not seem to do well in with the paphs so they were shifted to a more open area in another shade house and seem to be doing well there. They have less light in the afternoon than previously but I don't know if that is the difference or if it is the ambiance. All the slippers are in sphag and perlite. A lot of the phrags are sitting in saucers to allow capillary action to draw up water into the mix

The mini catts and other big catts are growing in bark or sometimes in bark and perlite. I find the perlite is a good medium because it aerates the mix a bit letting the water go through easily but also holding moisture around the roots.

Growers really need to find out what works for them. What I do may not work for other people.

