

Cedarvale Orchids - The Beginning *Ross & Rhonda Harvey*

I used to be a fairly keen bush walker and I was a fern buff. When we built our house at Albany Creek I built this big fern garden all-round the house. We filled it with all sorts of ferns, tree-ferns, ground-ferns, epiphytic-ferns, and all those sorts of things. We had every species of tree fern native to Australia except for one that was found by David Jones in North Queensland. One of the things I was really keen on was *Angiopteris evecta* (king fern), a huge thing with fronds 15 ft long and 6ft wide. The idea was to get one growing in the garden. A mate of mine had one from north Queensland we shifted it when he moved house; it took 4 men to carry it. To fill in this rain-forest garden we had to have orchids so we collected some and put them in the trees, probably all in the wrong places and killed some. We never saw any flowers; the grasshoppers, the bugs or something would get to them. What happened was we got a bit of an interest in building a bush house as a hobbyist so we could actually see orchid flowers. That was the start of it, about 30 years ago I suppose.

I had a few orchids but decided I needed more; so how could I do that? I went and saw Jim McKinney at Sunnybank. While he had orchids there was very little in the way of native orchids and he suggested that I see Ted Gregory at Mt. Tamborine and possibly join the Queensland Native Orchid Society so I did both of those. Then of course once you join the Native Orchid society you start to get educated, you start to learn, you start to see and to grow from there. I suppose I was a very keen hobbyist and bush walker. We continued to bush walk and with the society go to camps and collect etc. Eventually, with another couple of mad mates I started to go up to Cape York where we developed contacts from a nursery in the Atherton Tableland. All of a sudden the ferns went into the background and the orchids came into the foreground. I still had the ferns but we had the shade house and a tropical section was added to it and I was mad keen about growing Cooktown orchids and all those sorts of things. I suppose that's when the passion developed and we moved out here in 1990.



Everything went west as I had all these orchids and no place to put them, no house just a paddock. We agisted out the orchids all over the place, some to this mate some to another mate. I suppose we lost about a third to half of them because a lot of them were this beautiful tropical *nindii* type stuff that were not going to survive out in the open wet bush-house. We built a house and a shadehouse, the biggest shadehouse you could ever have and I knew it would be big enough. So we brought the stuff here and every thing was rosy except that we filled the shade house up because I continued purchasing from Ted. I was keen on natives; I was really keen on natives simply because of my association with the bush and bushwalking. I liked *kingianum* and I wasn't that keen on hybrids but I was a *speciosum* nut. I wanted to have the best *speciosums* you could ever have. The way to get the best was to buy from the person that had the best and at that stage I thought that was Ted Gregory so I used to buy a couple of every *speciosum* seedling that Ted produced as well as the occasional division. I've probably still got a lot of them.

At that stage we started to get really involved. Things were not real wonderful at work and I was a bit dissatisfied and around that time Ted Gregory decided to sell out his nursery. It was on the market for 6 - 8 months. Eventually Rhonda and I had a discussion about it, I thought I could start up a nursery and we could buy Ted out. So we bought up Ted's commercial stock and created Cedarvale Orchid Nursery. In 1999 I gave up my job and became a full time nurseryman because you really can't run a commercial nursery and work as well, you can't run a nursery like this on two days a week. Rhonda retired from her job two years later. We have stuck to Australian natives because that is the main interest. The only thing is that you can't make a living from Australian Natives, you need to diversify. The whole thing has changed, in the 1970's and 80's there were lots of orchid enthusiasts and hobbyists out there and you could make a reasonable living. Now the market has changed with the orchid enthusiast a dying race and the pot plant trade for the public is really the market. We are swinging away from the hobbyist; they represent only 5% - 10% of sales.

The growing area of Australian Native Orchids was hot/colds with most of the early work being done by Neil Finch with his TropiCools. They were coming on and people were clamouring for them. There was very little about so we started to invest in plants to develop our own hot/colds and to buy seedling hot/colds to build up our stock. The *kingianum* style of plant is not really suited to this area and straight *kingianum* is not terribly popular so we are moving out of that style of plant.

I have always been very keen on Cooktown orchids and wanted to have the best. Over a lot of years we have acquired some very good stock plants. This year we have flowered thousands of seedlings. The result was really good we were more than happy with the quality. Our original focus was on cool/intermediate natives but now we have diversified into Hot/Cold natives and tropical natives. We invested in a special house for the tropics and that has worked well for us so we are down that line. You have got to diversify; no nursery today can survive on a single product. You need flowers all year round; you have got to take your product to the market the market doesn't come to you any more. You can't sit home, have a beer and just pack orders on Monday and Tuesday with a relaxed time the rest of the week. You need to get out there, wave your flag, push your barrow and talk to the market, to do that you need flowering plants. Divisions of large speciosums are good and the hobby growers may appreciate their value but if it is presented to the general public for \$100 they would not even consider it. You have got to have flowers and you have got to have diversity. We have further diversified a little into hard canes, phalaenanthe dendrobiums and intermediate dendrobiums. We have got into orchids that flower around mother's day. We still need to go further and get into some of the intergeneric stuff. I'm not breeding them just going to buy them in. Our serious breeding program will still be Australian Natives but some of the stuff we breed is not bred for benching, it is bred for pot plants.

In the market place you need a big showy flower. The ideal is Avril's Gold; the public love it. They don't like the price but if you had 10,000 you'd sell everyone of them to the public. They're flashy, they're showy, they have great colour and lots of flowers. In hybridising there are three threads we are going down, we are breeding for pot plants, we are breeding tropical dendrobiums and because I'm a *speciosum* nut we are breeding them also. The problem with the *speciosum* is that they take 10 to 15 years to flower, you can only get about 3 generations in one person's life time. You have to

breed one lot wait, for them to flower, select the best of those to breed the next lot, once again wait for them to flower, select the best and make the next lot. If you still alive you will get to see them flower. With Cooktown (*bigibbum*) orchids I can get 3 generation in 10 years because they flower 2 years out of flask. That's the difference with the hard-cane stuff; we can see what we are doing and where we are going. This year we bred some magic Cooktown orchids.

We have looked at the supermarket trade but that's a pretty tough trade to get into. If you have a thousand plants they may take them but next month they will want another thousand and the month after. If you can't supply them they will just go else where. So that would mean that you have to bulk up to quite a large operation to meet their requirements. This would mean outputting more capital to acquire more growing houses and associated equipment. Then there is the extra staff that would be needed and their wages would eat up half of the money coming in. My estimation is that if you had the nursery in the position to supply supermarkets you would need to employ close to 10 people. After investing the capital necessary to build the nursery to a size that could supply supermarkets there is no guarantee that they would not walk away from it leaving you with a large debt. We are not going down that path as I am too old, you need a large amount of capital behind you and it is too risky. We do some wholesale work with some nurseries around town but not in a big way. We are happy to do the pot plant trade and to some extent we are happy to do the market tours and that sort of thing.

I really like seedlings, I love seedlings because you put them down, grow them on and there is something different, something new when they flower. Then you see whether you're a dismal failure or if you have achieved something worthwhile. With mericlones you know what you are getting, there's nothing new; that is the business side of the nursery, the pot plant trade. There is a price barrier with pot plants because the customer is in reality buying a bunch of flowers. After the flowers are finished it gets stuck out in the yard and if it dies it does not matter.



The export market is something we are into in a small way and only because I'm a *speciosum* nut and word gets around. They are in big demand at the moment and fetching big money. We are not big players in any market really. When you see some of the large Cymbidium nurseries down south and the overseas nurseries we just don't even exist. Australia is a hard market and Queensland is the hardest of all the states. What would sell for \$200 in the southern states you would be lucky to get \$50 here. Overseas there is plenty of money for good quality golden *speciosums*. It's a small but good side trade that could grow but it will be difficult to continue to produce the numbers of high quality *speciosums*.

Den. bigibbum v. superbum 'Rhonda'

The hot/colds of today are only about 12% hot (*bigibbum*) this allows them to be grown with the rest of the cool growers. They grow under 50% open shade house conditions, if it rains they all get wet. When you get 50:50 hot/cold some of those we still grow in the open but they really require a hard roof to keep the rain off during the cold winter months. The main reason for getting into the hot/colds is that they grow like weeds in this area. The cold stuff like *kingianum* require a cold snap to bring the flowers on and while people grow these plants not everyone gets a cold snap. We're fortunate that we are out here where it's a bit cooler here than some other places in SE

Queensland. We also try to do some cold simulation. In February at 1800 2000ft at around 4pm it's about 4 - 5 degrees cooler than on the coast. They really need that cold snap around February - March, not to set the flowers but to set all the flowers. The magic of Australian natives is not the size of the flower necessarily, although we are working on it, it's the number of flowers. Huge flower counts are possible. Without the cold snap you get a few flowers here and some more there, some now and some later. To simulate a cold snap we mist in the evenings at around 6pm from the end of February until the beginning of May. The misters come on for 30 seconds. All you want is a fine layer of water on the leaves so that when it evaporates it pulls the temperature down. You are not trying to water them just to lower the temperature. It is not necessary to do this for all the hot/colds although we do.

The hot/colds grow really well here because with the injection of Cooktown in them they are suited to this area and will flower without the cold snap. They give you good colours with increased size in the flowers over the cold growers and longevity is also a positive. Neil Finch was the real pioneer of this line of breeding. He started out using *bigibbum* var *compactum* as this is the cooler growing variety of the species. Down Neil's way, around central NSW, var *superbum* does not grow all that well without some additional heat. We also use a bit of *discolor* in the back ground of some of our crossings. When Neil started off he used 50% Cooktown but now, through the generations, we have some hybrids as low as 6%. We have kicked off some new ones and pushed 50% Cooktown back into them, That's not good for the southerners because they won't have the cold tolerance but around the south east of Queensland and northern NSW they should be great.

In the seedling game my life long ambition is to never see a seedling flower, because then I can say I'm successful, I've sold all my seedling stock. I've never achieved that but it is always the ambition. The only ones you want to see flower are those you put aside to see that they are at a suitable standard. Our seedling breeding lines are mainly



Den. speciosum var. *grandiflorum*

hot/colds but we do a few repeats because with the new parents available we have the opportunity to make greatly improved plants. As an example we are now able to make red Den x *delicatum*. We are targeting colour, size and flower longevity. One of negatives of that in some of the hot/colds the flower count has dropped and one of the important things in Australian natives is the flower count so we have to address that in some way. That is why you find a lot of *speciosum* being used these days. Unfortunately with *speciosum* you have to wait so long before they flower so that's an issue.

For our potting mix we used to use bark and charcoal, then charcoal became so difficult to get so we switched to straight bark. What we mainly use now is 100% bark. A couple of years ago we saw Maidenwell Diatomite at a QOS meeting so I picked up a couple of the sample bags. We trialled the recommended mix which was 50% Diatomite 40% Perlite and 10% peat. We got some startling results, we got some startling good results and we got some startling bad results. Some grew

like weeds and some just lost all their roots. All in all, the stuff where it works, grows a bit better or as equally well as if it is grown in straight bark and it comes at half the price of South Australian bark. So we will probably persevere with it. We had some Catts a while ago that needed repotting so I made a mix of bark (15mm-20mm chunks) and Diatomite and they did really well so I'm now trialling speciosums in the same sort of mix .Sarcs and Oncidiums also do very well with the extra moisture provided by the Diatomite. I don't use it for the tropical Dens at all. In our trial of Diatomite we set up the plants in the different mixes side by side and gave them the same treatment and perhaps this was some of the reasons for the failures but we cannot afford to have different regimes for different groups of plants, particularly where they are in the same growing areas.

For fertiliser we use the Grow Force products; I have been using them for 20-30 years. I don't support the idea that you need a variety of products. We do change through the year from the high nitrogen to flower booster but that is all and I am happy with the results we are getting.

Watering is really difficult and I tell people you must understand your environment because if I say I water twice a week it does not mean to say you can. It depends on how fast your plants dry out and that's a combination of all sorts of things. Out here we are lucky, there are few trees, no houses, no sheds so the wind blows right through the growing houses but in the suburbs there are all sorts of issues; how close the neighbours are what trees are close by, are you in a gully etc. If you were to water like I do you are probably watering too much. We water every two or three days in the summer time and when it gets very hot it may even be every day. When I water I never water heavily, I run the automatic sprinklers for about 4 minutes in the winter and in the summer for 6 - 8 minutes at a time. I would rather water every day for 3-4 minutes than once or twice a week for 10 minutes, it just seem to suit our culture better. The key to it all is to know your environment. That includes the medium you use, the type of pots you use, and how much your local growing area is exposed to the elements, the wind, the sun and how quickly everything dries out.

