

Talking Orchids with Doug Wanka

When we moved to Redcliffe from Dalby I didn't know what an orchid was. My brother was always keen on gardening and he had prize winning gardens. One day he asked "Would you like to go up to Mt Mead, I've got property where I can get some king orchids". I said "Oh yeah I'll go for a drive with you". I didn't know what an orchid was. He was pretty cunning too, he couldn't climb and I could, so we brought back these king orchids in flower and every time I smell *Den. speciosum* I think of that trip. Of course you could not do it now because it's all protected but then it was not a problem, on private property.

Back then QOS had shows up in City Hall and I went there with a friend. By this time I knew what an orchid was but knew little about them other than for a couple of native orchids. Mrs Kirkwood who came down from Cairns with orchids to a shop alongside the City Hall sold me a little compot of *Cattleya*. I took them home and put them in the bathroom as I was told they liked the steam and would be happy there. Then, while Kath was in hospital having our eldest son Geoffrey, her dad and I built our first bush-house; that was 37 years ago. It was a fairly big one because every one said you must build it big as it will need to expand. We built it 8 metres by 4 metres and thought it pretty big. Well when we left that property the back yard was completely full. We moved out to our current home on two acres. It had a big bush-house on it as the people we bought it from had a commercial nursery.

I've always had a mixed collection, not long after I built the bush house my barber Ces Baker (I had hair in those days) a foundation member of Redcliff Society wanted to get rid of his orchids. The price sounded pretty cheap so I bought the lot and he had a mixed collection. It included Cymbidiums, some of those real old good ones like Burgundian Shadow and new mericlones from France, a nice collection of slipper species together with variety of Dendrobiums.

With the additional space here I bought flasks and compots from Rod Price at Mudgeeraba, he was importing a lot of plants, Jim Raddatz a guy from Redcliffe used to get the bottles of clones in and I would buy those, mind you some of them were not much good, some were nice but a lot of them were over proliferated. I got pretty keen on slippers and I imported plants from Radcliffe's in England in bottles, they were very good. Ronny Williamson had the nursery over the south side and we imported a batch of what we thought were *Paph. hirsutissimum* but they turned out to be insigne. In the early days I did a bit of hybridising in conjunction with Ken Balke mainly with cattleyas. We also did a lot of *Dendrobium* hybrids, we were quite keen on the Dens. Over the years I've done a fair bit of hybridising.

Our growing area now consists of the big glass house we moved from Bruce Denham's Sunshine Orchid Nursery. It measures 18 metres by 9 metres and has a quite high fully glassed roof with 70% shade-cloth over the top. It's not heated; I have all the heating equipment but have not bothered to set it up as we are only cool here for a couple of months each year. Other than the glass-house I have soft-cane dendrobiums in an area that used to be the swimming pool with a high fence that I extended up with some pipe. This is covered by 30% shade-cloth. The soft-canases are

growing and flowering real well there. The cymbidiums are also under 30% and doing equally as well. The main bush-house is under 70%.

At the moment everything is growing quite well, the biggest concern is the water problem and I've tried to overcome that. I've put in one tank which is 30,000 litres and I've just ordered another one. If it ever rains again and we have plenty of water, we maybe able to save some money by not using the town water. I use about 1200 litres at a time to fertilise and I guess I would use more than this when watering. Without rain at all in the hot weather a tank is not going to last much more than a month.

With the soft-canines I only use low nitrogen fertiliser otherwise they end up with keikis and very few flowers. They get watered and fertilised differently to the cattleyas which, like most genera, prefer high nitrogen early in the growing season. Mine go through the year without a lot of high nitrogen; mainly for economics I use the GF9 which is the low nitrogen one and EX7 if I want high nitrogen. For the last 12 months I have been using Searl's booster fertiliser and found it very good. Perhaps



too good as I'm getting too many flowers on the cattleyas causing them to be bunched up and not displaying nicely.

My potting mix is pretty standard over the different genera. Over the years we've all been trapped by using something that someone thinks is very good. I still stick to the bark, the one from South Australia, Aus Gro. I did get a bad batch that we put some catts in so now I boil it before I use it. It's not a problem to boil it, you just

put it over a gas burner and you can boil 5-6 bags a day. Then I soak it and treat it with lime and fertiliser. I don't know if it does any good but it makes me feel good. I've worked out how to make my own charcoal so I add that to the bark and also some polystyrene foam. It's a pretty basic mix; 4 of bark 2 of foam and 1 of charcoal. I buy my foam from Koolfoam in big bags. It comes in 3 grades, real fine, medium and the chunky stuff.

The deciduous dendrobiums grow in the glass house because they prefer it hot and humid in summer probably the ideal situation would be to take them out during winter and maybe they would get more flowers but I flower them quite well in the glass house. The only problem is they drop a lot of leaves and are a bit messy. They get treated much the same as the soft canes. They get watered quite heavily from Fathers' Day and stop watering on Mothers' Day or perhaps a little bit before with soft canes perhaps Anzac Day depends on the plants, once you see they have terminated their growth you can reduce watering. Don't get me wrong I still water occasionally because if it's really dry you will get shrivelling of the pseudobulb and reduce flowering.

I start repotting in mid August and go right through to March/April. In the very hot weather they might be a little slower coming away but not enough to worry about. It helps if you go along late in winter and back cut.

My slippers are potted in 3 of bark 1 of charcoal and 1 of super coarse perlite. And I've been using rain water on those. Watering is dependant on the humidity, in the

cooler months it tends to be around once a week. I have a couple of pots with just the mix in them that I put amongst the plants and I tip that out from time to time to check if the mix drying out. When they have just been repotted they need a bit more water as the bark has not commenced to break down so they do not hold the moisture as well.

I don't use a lot of sprays. On the slippers I use fungicide Octave with Mancozeb to stop black spotting and I also use it on the dendrobiums as it helps to reduce leaf drop. For insect control I only use Supracide and only about once a year. I rug up in protective clothing one morning and do the whole lot. Now and again on a bench that needs repotting you come across a bit of scale.

For me orchid growing is a hobby that I enjoy but I try to make it pay its way.

