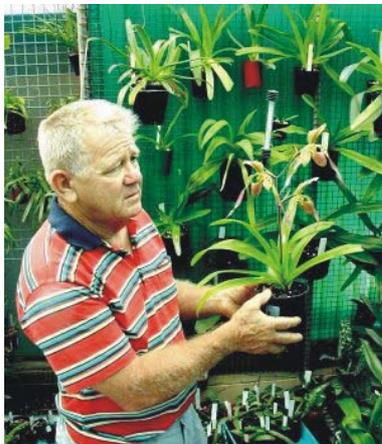


Talking with Reg McIlwain

I first became interested in orchids in 1962 when I used to go collecting with a chap that lived across the road from my father. I got married in 1964 and was well into growing native orchids then. I was a foundation member of the Australian Native Orchid Society when it was founded in 1965.

Gradually I got into exotic orchids and after moving from Cavendish Road to my present home I put up a quarantine house. I was importing orchids from all around the world for myself and other people. The interest wasn't in the species then but I was bringing in a few hundred plants at a time and all the little botanicals that growers are fighting to get now I couldn't get rid of. I remember when I sold out there was a heap of stuff left on one wall and I sold the lot for \$15 just to get rid of them. Now everyone wants them and with CITES it is very difficult. At one stage I probably had the biggest collection of species orchids in Brisbane.

My collection by then was mixed, based on Australian natives and species. I often wonder what I was really bringing in when I think of the slippers from the Philippines and countries in that area. They came in bundles and with all the variations that are in things like *Paph callosum* anything could have been included. Looking at it in hindsight I was probably bringing in new species or some the varieties that are popular now. I lay claim to introducing the alba form of *Paph. venustum* into Brisbane.



I used to deal with a bloke in Megalaya, northern India and I'd buy plants off him ranging from 50c to 80c a plant. He wrote to me one day and said he'd found an alba form of *Paph. venustum* and he called it *Paph. venustum* 'Measurianum' alba but he wanted \$5 each for them. I thought gee this is a jump up in price so I bought 5 plants. A short time ago when I was at John Woolf's in Toowoomba John asked if I remembered selling him a plant as he had them in flask. Over the time I ran the quarantine house I brought in some pretty good species.

My original interest in Australian Natives was with terrestrials and this is still the case. I dropped orchids for about 19 years. I bought a farm up at Rosewood and found out that it was sitting on coal so then I bought another one at Middle Road, Purga behind Amberley. I was cattle punching there for about 19 years, and then gave it up. Just before I gave it away I said to my wife I've got to take up something. What did I do well? I grew orchids well, so I'm into it again. I'd never try to get together again a collection of species like I had. You'd have to acquire it as an established collection, spend a lot of money or travel around a lot of nurseries etc. It's too difficult now. So I started collecting terrestrials again in about '98 but never seriously until 2000. I've always had a love of terrestrials. Years ago David Jones stayed with us and I worked in Melbourne for a time and really developed an interest in them. I get most of them through the tuber bank at the Victorian branch of the Australian Native Orchid Society. Their tuber list is out in

December and you can get them at about \$1 a time. You usually get about 3 tubers in a packet. That's available to anyone who wishes to join.

When you see plant benchings from the southern areas you see they are tabling terrestrials all the year round. Here in Brisbane we can't do that. We have to let them absolutely die down, keep them dry over the real hot months and then kick them off in say February. There are some terrestrials that prefer to start growing before that but we have a good chance of losing them if they are watered too early. In late February you can pot them up and start light watering. If you start too early you can lose the tubers, it's just too hot. The potting medium must let the water go straight through. If you are using a medium that allows the water to bank up to the top of the pot it's no good it's retaining the water too long. Helen Richards is the guru of growing terrestrials in Victoria and I've used her mixture but it just hasn't worked for me. She's been getting loam from in the Dandenong's for along time but the loam I've tried has not worked so you have to come up with a mixture of your own that works and stick to it. My mix is based on coarse sand with garden soil mixed in with it. To this is added fine wood shavings but they should be broken down a little. I also use a little dolomite although Helen now only uses dolomite with those that come from a lime area. A little blood & bone is included. It is best to turn it over a little before using it. The theory is that after you have emptied out your old medium you should include half that with your new mix, this is to preserve the mycorrhizal fungi. The problem with that is that if you empty a number of pots together on may carry a disease that will then be spread to all your repotted tubers. If you wish to reuse part of the old mix then only one pot should be handled at a time. When you think about it the bare root tubers you buy don't come with their old potting mix and they survive OK. I use Oak needles on the top of the pots so I don't disperse the mix when I'm watering.

Watering is the vital part of all this. You need to keep a watch full eye on it and only water when necessary. You can't set up a routine like you would for other orchids, say every 2-3 days in hot weather. I would water about once a week and let it run out the bottom of the pot. I often have a pot with just the mix in it. I can empty this out to see the water retention and determine if the plants need to be watered. It is an advantage to use rain water, Brisbane water is not the best. You need to experiment a little to see what's best for you. Down south they used to say you don't gain anything by using fertiliser but I think that's wrong. Some growers are finding that there is a dramatic increase in growth size if fertiliser is applied.

There are different branches of terrestrials. There are those that only reproduce their own tuber each year. The only way you can multiply these is by lifting the plant just as it starts to flower and cut the tuber away and replant it. It then takes two years to produce a second tuber. Alternatively seed propagation can be used. Others types can produce 4-5 new tubers a year. There are some that are very hard to grow up here, including the rufa group (eg *P. maxima* & *biseta*).

I really like *Sarcochilus*, some people say they are not easy to grow in Brisbane but I don't find that. They do need very good air flow and a cool area. I think I'm growing them as well as any one around at the moment. I stumbled upon a suitable fertiliser, Wolfgang's green Paph. fertiliser at one level measure to 10litres of water and I add a couple of drops of Morning Fresh detergent as a wetting agent. This is something I learnt from the Melbourne growers. I fertilise every second watering. The mixture that

I'm using is based on 9:1 perlite and peat, Canadian peat seems to be the go at the moment. What I do is modify this basic mix by taking out one part of the perlite and replacing it with one part 4mm blue metal and add blood & bone as well as some dolomite. The plants seem to thrive on it. I don't use deep pots; I try to always use squat pots for the Sarc. The pot they call the African violet pot, it's about five inches by two and a half high seems to work the best because it has very good drainage. You can't have *Sarcochilus* sitting in wet mixture it's got to drain. I'm growing mainly hybrids but have *hartmannii*, *fitzgeraldii*, *falcatus*, *ceciliae*, and I received a plant of *australis* the other day which was very pleasing. Some of the species are hard to grow and need specific conditions. My orchid house is well protected from the direct sun in summer and it tends to remain cooler than the rest of the yard while still having that good air flow so is an ideal environment for the Sarc.

My main interest in Paphs. is the species but I have got on to a contact that is bringing up complex from south so I'm building up a bit of a collection of complex ones. I'm hanging the multiflorals higher up now and they seem to be doing well. You need to look around and see what other growers are doing. I'm using the 9:1 mix for the Paphs but am going to replace one part perlite with bark. I think there is something in the bark that the Paphs like but I would not go back to all bark because I don't think it is possible to get good quality bark anymore. My preference is to pot into taller pots rather than squat pots, they drain better you also get a longer root growth so it's difficult to go back to squats. They do not like their roots to be cramped. One of the advantages of Paphs. is that any body that can grow pot plants successfully and understands the watering of them can look after your Paphs. when you go away. I used to water around the base of the plants with a watering can but that's for the birds, I've given it away and water overhead now.

You asked me how societies could be improved. I have always been of the opinion that if you have a plant in flower, especially species, bring the plant and table it. Someone will show interest and be glad you did. Something that disturbs me in modern day societies is the number of people who have huge collections and only table a plant that they think they can get first prize with it.

My favourite orchids are: evergreen terrestrial *Calanthe sylvatica* (syn. *imasuca*), herbaceous terrestrial *Pterostylis woollsi*, epiphyte *Sarcochilus* Melba.

