

We'll commence this newsletter with a message from Len Butt, received by us just as we were posting our first (no.13) issue:

"Hi! members, This is by way of introduction to your two new group leaders, Don & Pauline Lawie, P.O.Box 230, Babinda, 4861. Circumstances, mainly health, have forced me to relinquish leadership, but I am very delighted to leave the group in the hands of the above SGAP members knowing their dedication to the native orchid genera, plus the added fact they live right in a very rich indigenous orchid area. Babinda was also the home of Jack Wilkie, a great orchidologist, a man famous in his district, and a veteran researcher of the great mountain behind the town.

You have not seen the last of me. I intend to still participate as an active member, so please give the new aders full support and please remember, for those who oft forget, the \$5 sub is due in June, not December."

Thank you very much for that, Len; we'll do our best to live up to it. Our latest letter from Len indicates that he's due for a hospital stay in December, but that he fully intends to do a palm/ cycad/orchid 'gallop' around Queensland before attending the SGAP annual conference at Rockhampton next September. You can't keep a good man down.

Now to our questionnaire sent out with our last letter: ***We went fishing and sent letters to all the Queensland branches, but if they don't take the bait and become members after this effort, we'll pull our heads in and wait for applications before we bother you again. *** Out of 50 posted, we've had seven responses so far. This is pretty good, really, since most of our study group membership consists of SGAP branches and regions. This makes personal responses to group letters fairly difficult to elicit, since we would assume that study group newsletters would normally be simply 'tabled' at branch meetings for members' perusal, along with other branch newsletters, and once the guest speaker gets started nobody remembers to peruse anything much.

Hence, we have a request to Branch Secretaries who receive this letter: Instead of simply tabling it as usual, could you please ask your members whether there is someone keen on (or vaguely interested in) orchids, who would undertake to become our defacto member for the branch. All they would have to do would be to read our letters, give a summary of them to the branch meeting, and if they find anything they feel should be commented upon, they could write to us. One very valuable activity could be to report on orchid flowering times.

At our Branch (Cairns) at each meeting we circulate a book in which each member records plants that are flowering and fruiting in the current month. Over a period of years this builds up into a very interesting record of plant behaviour. For example, one could say from our 20 year records that *Dendrobium discolor* can be seen in flower at just about any month of the year, whereas *Dendrobium teretifolium* has only been known to flower in June in the Cairns area. (These are not facts, just examples of what is possible). If we could record branch observations over a range of Australian climatic and geographic areas for a period of years, I am sure that we would be able to collate a sheet of observed facts of great use to the working botanists in our country. To do so requires input from branch members of our study group. Please help.

Back to the questionnaire: We still hope to receive more, so please don't be shy if you still have yours. Just fill in what you can, and tell us what you think. We were astonished at the efforts of some of our respondents - two sent us three pages of extra notes. Oh, for a hundred such! All questionnaires returned included suggestions for future activities and we will work our way through these in forthcoming newsletters, commencing with 'Orchid of the Month' in this issue.

One suggestion received more than once was that we should publish a membership list to enable members to contact one another for plant swaps, outings, etc. It's a good idea, but we will not publish individual members' names and addresses without their specific permission. We can say that, probably as a reflection of Len Butt's leadership, we have a concentration of members in South East Queensland who could possibly meet, but most of the rest of us are far flung across our continent. We hope to get to the Rockie conference next year also, and perhaps an annual get together at our State conferences could be organised fairly simply by some sort of identification at the registration table. Ideas and suggestions on this subject are invited.

Our suggestion of supplying seed of a specific orchid to be supplied to members to grow and report upon has received a mixed reaction. I (Don) must admit that I don't know a lot about orchids, and I thought that you could sow seed pretty much in the same way as I sow various rainforest seeds with equally various success. Not so with orchids, which I suppose is why they are a special study subject. I do, however, have little plants which I am sure are seedlings arising on my potted *Spathoglottis plicata* which I noticed recently when I was potting-on. The little plants seemed to be loosely attached to the surface roots of the orchids and range in height from .5cm to 3cm approximately with the bigger ones with two definite roots. I detached them carefully and put them into a community pot, and have not lost any after about a month.

Perhaps a way to avoid engaging in the difficulties of laboratory technique seed raising would be to follow on from my experience by simply trying to sow seed in the root area of an existing plant. This would mean posting a plant to each participating member, allowing time for it to become established, and then following up by a simultaneous mailing of seed from a central location (here) for each member to sprinkle on their plant's roots. From there we could collate results: germination or not, if so, time to produce a viable plant, and from there to completion of cycle by producing flowers and plants. We could then compare results from various climatic and geographic areas and see what we have achieved. I mention *Spathoglottis* since they are common garden plants in Babinda and grow in ordinary potting mix with virtually no care at all. I can get all the seed we need of both *plicata* and *paulinae* species, and we could even get carried away if we have some success and try *paulinae* seed on *plicata* plants and vice versa. Who knows??? Mature plants are not very big and would fit into a 3kg. Express Post bag. Are you interested and willing to spend that sort of money?

Orchid of the Month We'll be featuring members' favourite orchids in accordance with a popular suggestion by respondents. To commence, who better could we choose to feature than Len Butt and his favourite orchid? *Cymbidium canaliculatum* var. *sparkesii*, and since this was also nominated by Andrew, it has to be first class off the rank.

We had some discussion as to how to present this. It is easy to just get out *Dockrill* and *Jones* and do a bit of a pinch of information, but then you can all get hold of these books too, through your SGAP Branch library, council library, or similar, not forgetting back issues of *Australian Plants* which is a rich mine of information. Another member suggestion was that we use 'personal articles in layman language' and that is how we propose to present our orchid of the month. Where we don't have any personal knowledge of the proposed orchid to be presented, we will write and ask the member who nominated that orchid to tell us about it in language that we can all enjoy.

I think that *Cymbidium madidum* was about the first orchid outside the Goldens and Pencils that I noticed out here at Josey Park when we moved here in 1976. About 1km from our place there was (and still is) an outstanding specimen growing high up on a dead tree in an open cow paddock which we pass when we go to and from town. The tree is about 45cm diameter, a bare trunk, no top, no neighbours, and the orchid lives near the top about 50 feet above the ground. Pauline told me what it was and I wondered for years when it would die, for it, like many humans, certainly had no visible means of support apart from the dead tree trunk. It flowers wonderfully each year, produces masses of seed pods and possibly billions of seeds. You know, of course, and I in time came to know, that it is feeding on the decaying tissues of the long dead tree. One day a

cyclone will come and the tree and orchid will go back to the gene pool, but in its long life time it has given us much pleasure and is an example of the resilience of plant life in hostile conditions.

Cymbidium madidum is quite common in our area. Plants can usually be found by a search of the upper canopy of any large Johnstone River Hardwood tree (*Backhousia bancroftii*), where they grow bigger and bigger in association with massive lumps of Basket Fern (*Drynaria rigidula*) and Elkhorn (*Platycterium hillii*) with various Ribbon Ferns (*Odontoglossum* and *Vittaria* spp.), depending from the mass of epiphytes. Or are these orchids really epiphytes? Certainly they grow on trees, and they are not parasites in as much as they do not tap into the tree's sapstream, but does the fact that they require the tree's dead tissue mean that the orchid can cause living tissue to die? Do they cause trees to die by trapping debris and water which would otherwise run off?

I am sure that they have a friendly relationship with their co-epiphytes, the *Drynaria* and *Platycteria*, since *C. madidum* puts out lots of vertical litter-catching roots to trap passing material which it can then digest. Does this then make it a saprophyte? It certainly has plenty of green leaves to carry out its own photosynthesis, so it is not a true saprophyte which relies solely on dead tissue for food. Should we ask the botanists to invent an entirely new plant type to cover the epiphytic/saprophytic *Cymbidium*? Am I talking through my hat? Correspondence is invited on the subject.

Well, that's told us a lot about *Cym. canaliculatum* var *sparkesii*, hasn't it? ... and I could mention another *Cym. madidum* favourite of mine that grows near the top of a living *Alexandra* palm on the bank of the Russell River a bit upstream of our place. It too has no near neighbours but it does have the big palm leaves to channel food and water to it. It can't have its roots into dead wood.....can it?

I (Pauline) have three *Cymbidium canaliculatum* plants growing in my green house. One I bought at a market many years ago and I believe it had come from the Atherton Tableland. I was told that the Black Orchid was very hard to grow on the Coast, but I did not manage to kill it, quite. When I realised what this plant was, thanks to *Dockrill*, I took it out of the pot of scoria where it had stagnated for years and put it into the fork of a dead guava branch. It has not yet shown any signs of appreciation. Although I have been interested in orchids for years, I only started cultivating them about 18 months ago when I managed to get half my green house covered with *Alsynite*. Unfortunately, the sheets run across the fall of the roof, so it leaks but at least it keeps out most of our rainfall. (We have had just under 182 inches over 166 days to the end of October; 200 plus inches here is not unusual. - Don refuses to record the rain in Napoleon's measurements.) I intended to allow the other half, in which I grow ferns, to get all the rain, but ferns now run a bad second and I've decided I'd like the rest of the roof covered (hint, hint). I treat all my plants alike, most of the year watering twice a week and fertilising weekly with a variety of fertilisers at half strength, or quarter strength for any on trees outside watering range.

The second plant I bought at an orchid show in Atherton and have no idea where it came from. The third came, via a friend, from up near Burketown somewhere. These I have had for a matter of months only, so I've never had any flowers. The two new plants are installed in hollows in the top of what could best be described as bits of old fence posts. I read in a magazine somewhere that to make good balanced show plants, it was an idea to break the mass of pseudobulbs in half which would encourage growth from both ends. I tried it and it has worked. The Burketown specimen which was a very dry, pale looking thing, though it had quite a few leaves, now has three healthy new pseudobulbs coming. These too are rather pale with just a tinge of burgundy on the tip. As I was told this plant had pale flowers when found, I'm hoping for some greenish flowers next year.

The plant bought in Atherton had plenty of pseudobulbs, just a couple of leaves and some very short roots. The first hollow log I put this into was evidently very attractive to possums, rats, or something and it was torn to pieces hurtling the plant onto a shelf creating a domino effect. It lost all its leaves, but it too now has

two new pseudobulbs in sight (one can actually be seen without a magnifying glass ... in good light) and they are a burgundy colour throughout, so I think I may have a Sparkesii! Back to Don

We saw some real beauts during a trip to Charters Towers in late September. We travelled down via Mount Garnet and Green Vale and returned via Townsville and the coast. We saw our first *Cym. canaliculatum* about 12km south of Greenvale, a massive plant with dozens of pseudobulbs, many hundreds of flowers, about 20 feet up in an ironbark tree, and looking very healthy and happy. We stopped to um and ah at the first few, then we saw quite a lot more on the road north of Charters Towers and again on the road towards Townsville. The flowers were a dark red colour which we presume were sparkesii, a very impressive orchid growing and flowering in an area that has forgotten what rain feels like.

Any personal observations members send us about *Cym. canaliculatum* will be printed next issue, along with our new feature orchid.



POBox 230, Babinda 4861



ASGAP Qld. Region,
P.O.Box 586,
FORTITUDE VALLEY 4006

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