

Don asks: Have you read the latest issue of our SGAP magazine, Australian Plants? The December '95 edition arrived at our place a week or so ago. It is one of those special editions that is dedicated to a specific subject, in this case the plants of the genus Verticordia. If I'd been asked a month ago what a Verticordia was, I'd have guessed that it was some sort of heart condition, but now I know better.

The 145th edition of Australian Plants is a triumphant success for the Verticordia Study Group and shows just what a Study Group can achieve. On page 231 Editor Payne has a note which I hope he will allow me to quote: "Study Groups: These comprise Society members who collaborate (usually by mail) to exchange experiences on cultivation and propagation of a group of plants. This issue reports on the Verticordia Study Group."

As I read that, and read the descriptions of those pretty Western Australian plants that it would be foolish for me to try to grow here in our wet lowland tropics, I day-dreamed of a forthcoming issue of that same magazine in which Editor Payne announces: "This issue reports on the Indigenous Orchid Study Group..."

It seems that our study group needs an aim. The very nature of the type of plants we study precludes the easy Australia-wide exchange of plants or propagating material. Yet, whereas Verticordia are difficult to grow, even in their own home State, some orchid species are able to grow over almost the whole of our vast range of climatic conditions in Australia. Our Group has members in every State and, collectively, we grow a large percentage of the orchids which occur in Australia. If we each "exchange experiences of cultivation and propagation" over a sufficient period of time, using the Group Leaders as the letter box and the Group newsletter as the means of dissemination, then it is not impossible that we will eventually amass enough info to be able to put a case to Editor Payne for an issue to be devoted to our specific interest.

Keeping that in mind, can we ask each member to start making notes on what you are doing, to take slides of your best efforts, and to send them along to us to collate. Tell us your problems and failures also, so that we can relate them in the newsletter and ask members to tell us how they have solved such problems. In just a few years perhaps, we may have the means for our magazine issue. Let's make this our New Year's Resolution that we will keep.

Pauline continues: We have had some extremely encouraging reactions from members of our study group and in the next newsletter we expect to feature Spiranthes sinensis, one of the above mentioned species, i.e., found in five states.

Our Cairns member, an orchid grower from way back, sent a beautiful letter in which she mentioned seeing native orchids for sale at Target. She said she would not buy them because they never flower again here, and the sales assistant replied that hers flowered all the time, then asked our member, "Do you feed them"? and added, "You must feed them every fortnight." Our busy member scuttled off, duly chastened.

Of course we hot footed it into Target the next time we went to Cairns and were rewarded with a *D. kingianum* at \$7. I was not prepared to pay twice that for a *D. gracilicauli*, with an unwanted mount and other herbage. I have since punted \$5 on a *Sarcochilus falcatus* which managed to survive the Christmas rush, just.

Our Cairns member made some very interesting comments on *Cym. madidum*. She has three *Cymbidium canaliculatum* plants in different conditions and will monitor their progress. At least she has had a flower on one of them this year which is one more than I have. She also asks whether the yellow flowered form of *D. teretifolium* should be called *D. calamiforme*. Jones says yes and Dockrill says it is *D. teretifolium* var *fasciculatum*. This will be the first enquiry we shall make of the taxonomists.

When I became sufficiently interested in my orchids to want to care for them properly, I looked for a book to learn how. They were all so complicated that I nearly gave up till a couple of growers mentioned a 'little blue book'. I finally tracked one down at a Cairns Garden Expo. It is called Basic Guide to Orchid Growing for new growers in the Sunshine State By Ross Maidment, B. Ag.Sc. I have the Revised Edition, August, 1991, and paid the princely sum of \$3 for it. It is a little A5 sized book of 24 pages and I find it invaluable.

Mr. Maidment of Aranbeem Orchids, Priests Road, Deception Bay 4508, says the book is of particular relevance for the area between Mackay in the north to Grafton in the south and east of the Great Divide.

Needless to say, I am not capable of following all the good advice to the letter, but I now have my plants under cover, water them twice a week (more or less depending on the weather) and fertilise them almost every week with half strength solution. A lot of plants which are native to the area, I have attached to trees in the garden and rain dictates whether or not they are fed. Since I have been following Maidment I have been rewarded with good growth and some beautiful flowers. I also keep a card for each species and record developments.

We are, of course, a long way further north than Mackay and I'm beginning to think I might start to personalise my cultural activities. So far I have treated all plants exactly the same way regardless of genera - well orchids are orchids, aren't they? I now know there are many different growth patterns and flowering times, and I'd like to change my fertilising regimen so that I use the low nitrogen formula at the correct time for each group of plants. The trouble is that I don't know how long before the expected flowering time the change should take place. Can anyone tell me?

Do members in other areas have a similar book?

The December issue of Australian Orchid Review has a review by Walter T. Upton of The Orchids of Victoria, by Gary Backhouse and Jeffrey Jeanes. When a man with the reputation of Walter T. Upton says things like "I could not put it down" and "I have already proved the worth of this book..." it would have to be a must have for all Victorians. It is published by Melbourne University Press and costs \$55.95. Would a Victorian member care to write a review for our study group newsletter?

MALAXIS LATIFOLIA

I was lucky enough to get hold of some Malaxis plants in the middle of last year. As they are native to our area, I planted one big one outside and put the other two in pots in the shade house where I could look after them properly. I was pleased I did too as the outside one was dug up by bandicoots on several occasions. Then intruders in the shade house caused the other big one to be hurled out of its pot and the small one snapped off about half an inch above the roots. By this time a tiny green shoot appeared at the base of the one outside and as it hadn't been dug up for a few weeks, I took the other large one out and planted it nearby.

Three months after planting they all had new pseudobulbs coming and the large plants produced flower spikes about two months later.

The inflorescences were beginning to look interesting when I went down to Brisbane in mid December for our youngest child's graduation. Whilst I was away Babinda experienced temperatures in the low 40s so when I returned and found the bottom part of the inflorescences turning brown, I put it down to heat stress. On my next orchid run, I took a closer look and realised that the flowers were actually opening, so I raced in and read everything I could find in both Dockrill and Jones and then went back for another look with a lens. The words just don't do the exquisite little blooms justice.

What I found of particular interest is that the books both list all the colours in which these flowers are found, but neither one says that each flower is all these colours in turn. The buds are a pale lime green which darken as they mature. The flowers then go from green to purplish green, to brownish purple, to purplish brown to dark brown. They then fade back through the spectrum. The other thing I found interesting was that the inflorescence continues to lengthen. The books say 5-30cm. My largest one is now 50cm and there are still a few very congested buds on top.

The small plant, kept in the shade house so it could be looked after properly, came from exactly the same place and has received the same treatment, with the exception that it has had two or three waterings per week, whilst in the six months I have had them, the outside plants have received close to 90 inches of rain and have better air circulation. The plant in the shadehouse appears to be growing true to the books.