

Newsletter 69      December 2009

*SPIRANTHES SINENSIS*Barbara Henderson – leader of the Wallum Study Group  
and well known for her Heathland Rambles

It was on Bribie Island during my primary schooldays in the early 1950s that I saw my first ever terrestrial orchid, a spike of pink and white flowers in a perfect spiral around the stem. My knowledge then was non-existent, but there it was, among the purple *Viola betonicifolia* in what my best friend and I called "The Violet Patch". It was our secret, and we went there often. Nowadays a retirement village covers what was a special place, where I also found a pink *Caladenia carnea*, Pink Fingers. My husband, a Burpengary boy, calls this orchid Table and Chair, so he must have seen them in the bush near his childhood home. Both Bribie Island and Burpengary are now developed beyond the imagination of the "oldies" of our childhoods, and these orchids are probably non-existent now - 60 years later.

That first orchid I saw was *Spiranthes sinensis*, Ladies Tresses or Lambtails, depending on whether you were from Bribie Island or Burpengary. The next time I was to see it was a few years later, after we moved to Redcliffe to live, following my father's death. In the 1950s lawns weren't the obsession they now are, and the grass was mostly kept in check gently with the old push mower. With this sort of care, spikes of pink & white flowers would sometimes emerge, and we'd find the dainty *Spiranthes sinensis* among the long grass. I still didn't really know what they were, though; that knowledge wouldn't come until after 1979, following 20 or so years filled with working, boyfriends, marriage, home & children. I discovered the Redcliffe Australian Plants Club, which had previously been the local SGAP branch, and was on the road to knowledge and discovery.

By that time, Redcliffe was pretty well developed and its remaining bushland was shrinking. Our group went out in the mid 1980s to see what botanical treasures were left. There weren't many orchids to be found, but existing plant lists had the names of a few and their locations. No *Spiranthes sinensis* though, but eventually a Club member reported in delight that dozens were flowering on a neighbour's footpath. It was summertime, there had been some rain, the neighbours were away, and on the unmown footpath, the *Spiranthes* had taken the opportunity to emerge and flower. On the neighbours' return, out came the motor-mower, and despite Merle's attempts to interest the people in this special gift from Nature, away went the orchids to produce a nice tidy footpath – tidy? The following year, the orchids returned further along the footpath, presumably after their seeds being blown in that direction. Merle did some research, and later provided me with information for the Club's newsletter.

I never did see *Spiranthes sinensis* at Redcliffe, as I had remarried and moved to a banana farm in the foothills of the D'Aguilar Range between Dayboro and Samford, in the western rural part of the then Pine Rivers Shire. However, I was to be given more surprises by this lovely little orchid. By the end of the 1980s, Geoff's farm had been producing bananas for about 40 years. On the western slopes of Mt. Kobble, facing the north, it was in mainly rather open Eucalypt forest with light grassy understory, mostly *Themeda triandra*, Kangaroo Grass, and a few small flowering plants, and very hilly.

Geoff gave me a small gully to convert into a rainforest garden. Along the steep slope I had a couple of narrow tracks, and one day, to my amazement, there was a spike of spiralling pink and white flowers - a single *Spiranthes sinensis*! On the edge of this track! In what had been a banana patch for

30 years! How's that? In the years to follow, in three different locations in my front garden, at different times, single orchid spikes appeared! Aren't our little Aussies amazing? Another sighting was during a weekend stay by members of the Wallum Study Group at the former Beerwah Field Study Centre, the buildings previously used by the Department of Forestry. (This Beerwah Forest Station was established in the 1930s, and in the 80s and 90s was leased by the Australian Marine Conservation Society. The Study Group often used the accommodation for weekend visits to the nearby Beerwah Scientific Area 1, our happy-hunting Wallum ground). One weekend, in unmown grass adjacent to the Forestry drying shed, there was a single pink and white flower spike, again, *Spiranthes sinensis* taking advantage of the situation to appear and flower.

The Redcliffe Peninsula never did produce many terrestrial orchids. I can find only three species on old lists from the 1970s and 80s, these being (as listed at the time and possibly incorrect), *Geodorum pictum*, *Pterostylis nutans* and *Arthrochilus irritabilis*. The last of those three was one of several ground orchids I found on the two acre block my younger daughter and husband purchased at Burpengary in 1988. There were quite a lot of plants pushing up through fallen bark of a large Scribbly Gum, *Eucalyptus racemosa*; it was interesting that they grew only on the western and southern sides of the base of the tree. They have survived being covered by bark and twigs, and the scratchings of the chooks for over 20 years so far. There is a chance this property and others adjoining will be bought by a developer, which I am dreading, as there are a lot of interesting plants. The *Geodorum* is probably *G neocaledonicum*. I can't keep up with all the name changes, but you will know what I mean.

This orchid (*G densiflorum*) appeared along the paths first put through the Redcliffe Botanic Gardens around 1989/90, when the area was known as the "Wallum Project". This was the brainchild of a member of the Redcliffe SGAP group/Plants Club, and has had quite a chequered life. It is not a Regional Botanic Gardens – it is too small – but there is an article about it in the March 2009 (Queensland Region) Bulletin. *Geodorum* is quite common in south-east coastal Queensland, and is seen on most of our bush "rambles". *Pterostylis nutans* is also fairly common in the region, and was found in the Clontarf area of the Redcliffe Peninsula, and between Kippa Ring and Rothwell, as you go west out of the city.

## IN SEARCH OF A RED SPIDER

By Linda Rogan

As a member of the Conservation group of the Australian Native Orchid Society, Victoria, many of my forays into the bush are to search for, weed near or monitor rare or vulnerable orchids. On Wednesday 30 September Peter (Linda's husband) and I joined such a search led by Geoff Neville from Department of Sustainability and Environment.

The place we explored was an old goldfield area, rocky and sloping with many holes to be avoided. The morning was spent gradually covering several steep gully slopes including one where the orchids were already known to occur. After more than an hour it felt good to start finding a few deep red spiders in bloom. It was disappointing that we only found about the same number already known in the area. In the afternoon we were hopeful of new discoveries as we covered areas not yet seen by our leader. By mid-afternoon some of the group were losing enthusiasm and headed elsewhere. Although weary, most of us continued for one more pass through the bushland. One person, who wandered further than the rest, cried "Eureka, a red spider". We altered our return route to pass closer to the area of discovery. Elation set in when we found 17 blooms plus more plants in bud or leaf. We had found a new population and a significant addition to the numbers of known plants. Information such as this is important in prioritizing conservation activities within reserves and deciding when action such as ex-situ growing from seed is needed as a part of a recovery plan.



The quarry, *Arachmorchis* (*Caladenia*) *clavescens*, the Castlemaine Spider Orchid, is one of a group of red spiders related to *Arachmorchis* (*Caladenia*) *concolor*. Some are still undescribed while others like *A clavescens*, have been named recently. All are vulnerable, and some also rare and threatened.

When you look at the photo, northerners will be reminded that down south spider orchids are terrestrials in the *Arachmorchis* (*Caladenia*) genus. The inset in the photo shows the distinctive labellum “that has four rows of small calli that finish at about the labellum bend, well short of the apex.” according to Jeanes & Backhouse *Wild Orchids of Victoria Australia* 2006.

AUSTRALIAN PLANTS Vol. 24, No. 196

Don Lawie

It was a nebulous dream for years to have an *Australian Plants* edition completely devoted to Indigenous Orchids, but we felt it was just too difficult. Our South-side of Sydney member, Margaret Bradhurst didn't think so. Margaret and colleague Doug Rickard did all the work, cajoled authors and then went through the endless layout and setup labours. The result was a triumph for them and a resounding first for the Indigenous Orchid Study Group. There is almost enough material for another issue, thanks to the response to Margaret's blandishments.

One of the stories in the magazine was an article by Margaret about the Helmet Orchids (*Corybas*) of the Sydney region. We have seen a member of this elusive genus only once, long ago now. Len Lawler was leading a Tablelands SGAP outing behind the hills of Atherton and he pointed out a colony of little, single leaf plants in the leaf litter.



Having little to do with any of the above, I had my 70th birthday in October and one of the cards received has a beautiful painting on the front of *Corybas macranthus*, the New Zealand Spider Orchid. As well as occurring in New Zealand, *Corybas macranthus* grows in several southern islands including Australia's Macquarie Island. I understand that this qualifies it to be the world's most southerly growing orchid. One can imagine the conditions under which it grows in that freezing and wind-blasted

NEW ZEALAND ORCHIDS  
SPIDER ORCHID (*Corybas macranthus*)  
Throughout New Zealand on damp bush floor.  
This specimen from Queenstown.

By Barbara McKerchar

climate, yet it has close relatives in the Sydney area and even up here in North Queensland, about 5,000 kilometres and half a world away. What wonderful plants orchids are!

And nothing to do with orchids at all, our son Duncan came out from the UK for the big birthday and brought me a 40 year old and a 30 year old bottle of whisky to make the Big Seventy. What wonderful things people can also be!

*DIURIS FRAGRANTISSIMA*

SUNSHINE DIURIS OR FRAGRANT DOUBLETAIL

Kate Vlcek, DSE Warrnambool

A few years ago, *Diuris fragrantissima* was probably Victoria's rarest plant, known from a single remaining wild plant. Sunshine Diuris historically occurred on the native grassland plains of Melbourne, particularly the western area, and was so abundant that it was described as looking like carpets of snow. Due to habitat loss and destruction, as a result of urban population growth and industrial development, and altered fire regimes, the Diuris declined dramatically.

*Diuris fragrantissima* flowers from the end of October to the beginning of November and can have up to about eight flowers on a tall, robust spike. The leaves form a loose grass-like clump and can be difficult to see without the inflorescence. The flowers are fragrant and white with soft pink markings and extended lateral sepals. Sunshine Diuris is thought to be pollinated by native bees. The original remaining plant was pollinated and seed collected, this seed became the basis of today's population.

A highly successful reintroduction program was initiated by the Department of Sustainability and Environment in partnership with the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne, Melbourne Zoo, ANOS and local shires. The result is two hundred happily flowering "D. frag", as it's affectionately known, which can once again be enjoyed by those who delight in the delicate beauty of a field of snow.

Kate has made a present to us all of an accurate, yet atmospheric, painting of this beautiful orchid. Just about anyone can take a good photograph these days, but it takes real talent to paint like this and considerable generosity to allow our study group to print it. We have decided it deserves good "color copy" paper for printing and feel a bit mean for folding it. We will be displaying ours on the wall. Thank you, Kate.

Confidor made an appearance in our last newsletter. I described it as "the big gun", but well known gardening writer, Holly Kerr Forsyth, wrote in a recent column that it had low toxicity, so I won't be afraid of poisoning myself and will give it a better chance in future. However, I will still not use it on my tiny *Saccolabiopsis armitii* as only one of the three plants has made a come back this time. What on earth could I have been thinking; even Lazarus only came back from the dead once.

The *Schoenorchis micrantha* is looking heaps better, probably because I took it out of the shade house and put it onto a rainforest tree. It is a local species and was only put into the shade house as the previous host tree was "Larried". It is amazing that nearly four years after the Cyclone we are still getting the odd tree fall, yet all the tons of small timber and sawn logs have disappeared into the jungle floor, though large trunks are still intact and root plates have sprouted large saplings on their top edges four metres above the surrounding ground.

Nature is pretty wonderful too!

