

The Changes in a Decade – an orchid’s perspective

by Brendan Sayers

It must be almost a decade since I contributed to the Journal of the RHSI, when I wrote on the subject of orchids and the National Botanic Gardens expeditions to the Central American country of Belize. How time flies and when asked to contribute (although encouraged by Koraley, is a more correct term) I thought it best to look at the changes that have occurred with orchid culture in Ireland within the last fifteen years or so.

When I first seriously dabbled in orchids, there was little opportunity to go and purchase plants on the island. Divisions of *Cymbidiums* and *Paphiopedilums* were the usual way to get some greenhouse orchids and a visit to the Alpine Garden Society show would provide the opportunity to obtain some *Pleione*. How different things are today!

Phalaenopsis, the moth orchid, has become one of the most popular houseplants in Ireland and Irish gardeners and householders have learned to successfully grow and re-flower them even though they are produced on such a scale that to treat them as a disposable houseplant is the producers plan. Re-flowering of *Cymbidium* still appears to be a major problem for gardeners, judging from the queries that come to my desk. Maybe the answer to this is the answer to many of the problems that were the cause for so few choices in orchids a decade ago. The myth that orchids are difficult to grow is just that! *Cymbidiums* are tough, cool growing orchids that need good light during the growing period (not direct sun) and require cool temperatures at night during the bud initiation stage, which occurs in June and July. So best to keep them outdoors during that period but out of sight must not mean out of mind. They require good watering and feeding during this period.

The variety of indoor orchids available from DIY stores, garden centres and supermarkets expands year by year. Hybrids bred from Asian *Phalaenopsis*, South American *Oncidium* and *Odontoglossum* and Australian *Dendrobium*, among others, are now freely available. Enough interest has been shown that a Society dedicated to orchid enthusiasts was formed eight years ago and looks like surviving. Enthusiasm within horticultural groups has led to workshops dedicated to orchid culture. There is now one orchid nursery on the island with most of its business is done through the World Wide Web.

Gardeners have upped the ante as well. Confident with the successful re-flowering of a *Phalaenopsis* they have moved onto *Vanda*, *Phragmipedium* and other genera that are more demanding. Although hybrids offer more in terms of floral longevity, species have found their way into many orchid fanciers’ collections. One species now to be seen in Irish collections is *Sobralia macrantha*. The flowers are one of the largest in the natural orchid world but have a fleeting presence. They remain in perfection for just a single day though stems produce flowers for approximately two weeks. It seems an odd choice for people with limited space but is an indication of how captivating the orchid family can be.

Hardy orchids have also expanded in range in Irish gardens. Occasionally, in the past, one would come across a clump of *Dactylorhiza* in an Irish border. One such is named after the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin and was to be found in great clumps in Butterstream, Co Meath. That garden is no longer with us as a public enterprise but I am sure the orchid has found its way to many other gardens. Recent advances in propagation and hybridisation of orchids, as a result of conservation efforts, have led to many other hardy genera being available for culture. The range of *Cypripedium*, the hardy slipper orchids, has expanded. Especially vigorous are the hybrids in this group, quickly building to large clumps suitable for light shady spots. Specialities like *Cypripedium plectrochilum*, a true connoisseur orchid; red pigment rich helleborines and woodland *Calanthe* can now be seen in Irish gardens.

There are hardy orchids that have yet to become popular, or at least semi-popular in Ireland. *Bletilla striata* is an easily cultivated plant so I expect that the forms and hybrids with other species will grow as well here in our benign climate. *Calanthe* also has the potential to become more popular, especially the hybrids being produced by Japanese nurserymen. And there are more people growing native orchids though not of Irish stock. It would be nice to see Irish native orchids, grown from Irish seed, available for culture here in the future.

So the future looks bright for orchids in Ireland. If you are one of the few who have yet to dabble in growing these 'exotics' in your home or garden there is a myriad of plants to choose from. And the choice is big. There are after all about 30,000 naturally occurring species and well over 100,000 man made hybrids! ●