

### How I became interested in growing orchids?

By Greg Steenbeeke

#### Planting the seed

To answer a question of how I became interested in growing orchids is to identify the time when I changed from being a passive observer to being one who sought out plants which I was interested in growing. I had always been around orchids – the penalty of being a second generation grower I guess. My father had a diverse collection of cymbidiums, mainly older styles because that was what he had collected over the preceding decade or more. He had connections though – to the Deane family of the Blue Mountains and the folk at Cecil Park and Wondabah – and was trying to improve the types he grew. He also had the usual ‘hangers on’ that a Sydney region grower had – the odd plant of *Dendrobium nobile* and *Paphiopedilum insigne*, and the ubiquitous reed stem epidendrums. These crucifix orchids were under the trees in the front garden. Mainly they were red flowered types, with a few plants of orange and even possibly a pinky-purple one. That one and the oranges were clumping plants, but the reds were sprawling around under the trees and made a lovely carpet, although the shading meant they weren’t in flower very often.

So that was where I was introduced to orchids. They were a part of my life, for all of my life. In fact, my parents have related a story to my own family of me, as a very young child, walking past the local police station, and (for reasons I don’t know to this day) proudly proclaiming that “my dad grows marijuana, he’s got lots of pot plants”. I must admit I don’t know the outcome of this very public declaration, but suffice to say I have no knowledge of a visit from the local constabulary with regard to this potentially embarrassing issue.

But the question remains – how did I become interested in growing orchids? To answer that, another element must come into play. We had moved to the Blue Mountains full time, when dad had retired from the university and had taken up tending the orchids as a very sizeable part of his day. As a gift – probably for his birthday but maybe for Christmas, mum had bought him a small book on Australian orchids which had the bonus of great photos. That was how I was first introduced to Leo Cady – not in person though, that wouldn’t happen for many years. One day as a 12 or 13 year old I was thumbing through the book when I came across a picture of a flower I recognised. I knew I had seen this plant – not much earlier in fact. But it wasn’t ‘an orchid’ as I understood them. It wasn’t a cymbid nor a dendrobe, and certainly not one of the others to which I had access. I was a keen walker on the tracks and trails around home – another love instilled by my dad – and had started taking an interest in what I was seeing. Always keen to know more about the world around me, I had started to look closely at the plants I was seeing during my walks.

One of the plants I stumbled across was a small herb under the ferns, with two leaves and a single reddish-purple flower. The flower was adorned with a small ant-shaped structure, and on reflection the flower was so clearly an orchid. The column should have given it away, and the labellum, but as a budding naturalist I didn’t have an understanding yet of such distinctive structures in flowers. This small *Chiloglottis* – probably *C. reflexa* but maybe *C. seminuda* – was in the bottom of the gully at the end of the street, growing in the moist forest as a common plant in the undergrowth.

And that was it, I was hooked. I had a name for this plant. Funny enough, I don't know if things may have been different had I found a picture book for other plants in the Blue Mountains. Would it be the orchids that kept me so entranced in the years that followed? After all, as one of the regions of the planet with extraordinarily high plant diversity, there were literally thousands of other plants that could have cast a spell upon me in the sandstone country around Sydney.

Maybe though, like the male wasps that are equally entranced by these sexual deceptors, it was irrelevant. The fact that the orchids were already a large, but equally ignored, part of my life meant that it was very likely the largest family of flowering plants would entrap me at some stage.

### **Taking root**

Getting more involved in the book by Cady and Rotherham I realised that I had seen a number of the plants they recorded in their volume. I started keeping a mental tally of the various orchids I was coming across in my travels – although like a twitcher does with birds, the list soon needed to be written down. Finding resources and ways of identifying the plants led me on to a new resource. While Leo's book was useful to find different genera based on how they were photographed by Rotherham, it was the *Flora of the Sydney Region* at the school's library that became the best resource I had to hand. It was also the step that got me involved in assessing vegetation and plants, which is still the career I follow today.

A few of the orchids in the Blue Mountains I had seen before, often not realising that they were orchids – greenhoods and bonnet orchids and the small pixie caps. In particular the local rock orchids – three different species (*Dendrobium speciosum*, *Dendrobium striolatum* and *Cestichis reflexa*) were found within 5 minutes' walk of home – were added to my list. They were plants that looked like they could be grown in pots like the orchids with which I was familiar. I found a few small pieces on a trip to a friend's backyard (a statement which itself takes on a whole new meaning in the Blue Mountains) and brought them home to try. The yellow rock orchid (at the time known as *Liparis reflexa* but now as *Cestichis reflexa*) and the pencil orchid (*Dendrobium striolatum*, at times known as *Dockrillia striolata*) were either potted or tied to a big chunk of pine bark and put into a sheltered part of dad's shadehouse.

My father noticed my developing interest and started to help me get more involved. We attended the meetings of the local orchid society and through that I got to learn more widely about what was around in the way of orchids. It was also where I truly started to realise what I wanted to be involved in when it came to orchids. Species held the attraction of being able to be seen in the wild – where I spent my free time. While hybrids were nice, and certainly had attraction, they were still essentially artificial.

At home I was also starting to take on more of a growers' attitude. My first shade structure was very basic. Little more than a sheet of shadecloth where the glasshouse had been (it was removed before I was old enough to notice it) and a basic bench, it very rapidly filled with plants given to me or bought, or won in raffles. While I had an immediate connection to the species, it wasn't the core of my developing collection. Backbulbs struck from dad's plants, gifts from people like Alan Merriman and Roy Deane, and even the odd plant I bought myself or traded other plants for were soon starting to occupy bench space. I introduced myself to some of the researchers in orchids at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney when we went there for an open day, and Don Blaxell and Peter Weston must have seen something in my interest and helped me get more involved. Doing work experience at the RBG allowed me to see how a diverse, organised nursery and plant collection was run. It also made it abundantly clear that the thing I most needed to do with my developing collection, and enhance my expertise as an observer of the natural world, was to catalogue what I had. My shadehouse also changed – becoming a structure with a proper frame and benches, similar to what my dad was using.

### **Full Bloom**

The first entry in my collection logbook was made in 1985. I obtained my first plant in the year before. It was a *Dendrobium speciosum* var. *hillii* from the local orchid society that, according to the records I still maintain, cost me \$3 suggesting it was probably a raffle prize. The collection slowly accrued additions from an increasing array of sources. Then came an opportunity to help Brian Deane in his nursery at

Glenbrook; doing repotting in exchange for small divisions of the plants with which I was working. Pleasingly, some of the plants I worked with and obtained are still alive and kicking in my collection – 25 years later.

After I got my licence, and a job, and became more mobile, I joined a number of societies where members had the same interests as me. I became a member of the NSW S.P.E.C.I.E.S. Orchid Society and the short lived Hawkesbury ANOS Group as well as the Sydney and Macarthur ANOS Groups. These four groups were instrumental in developing the main focal points of my hobby – species and Australian natives.

So, coming back to the original question, how I became interested in growing orchids? It started by immersion – seeing them being grown, day in day out. Then a trigger came in the shape of the plant that got me interested in the variety and diversity of this hugely interesting family of plants. Finding plants I could succeed with made the affliction permanent. Even though there have been losses and an eventual determination of sticking with things that could grow in my conditions, I am still stuck with wanting to try with other varieties that I can enjoy. While I have a need to curb energy use to keep costs down, and a desire to grow – or try – almost everything I see, I still think that how I became interested in growing orchids remains. Now though, the question is more along the lines of ‘how might I be able to grow that gorgeous thing?’ ...