

## Orchid Hybridising – for Love not Money

By Terri Bade

Mothers-in-law sometimes get a bad rap! The stereotype often portrayed in fiction and comedy is of an interfering and annoying influence. My mother-in-law did not fit that stereotype, far from it in fact. She was a gentle and caring soul who would never give advice unless it was asked for. There should be more people in the world like that. What does all this have to do with orchid hybridising I hear you say! Well that will become evident as we go along.

I started growing orchids about 35 years ago, never really intending to, but as happens with so many growers, it just happened. When I was a child we had an 'orchid house' in our back yard. It was made of timber slats and a variety of plants grew there including some orchids. Two that I remember clearly were a very dark mauve *Cattleya* that always bloomed with three huge flowers, and a very pretty pink *Vanda* that always seemed to be in flower. My brothers would also sometimes rescue orchids from the bush after storms had brought down the trees, and many were relocated to the huge mango trees in our yard. I was considerably younger than my brothers and none of this interested me very much, but I did admire the strange and colourful flowers from time to time. I do remember that my eldest brother had joined an Orchid Club for a time, and had won a first prize with the *Vanda*, which flowered for many years in the orchid house until it grew too large and was relocated outside, where it grew even better.

Fast forward about twenty years or so and my new bride and I moved to Townsville. It was here that the 'orchid bug' bit me. Walking through the gardening area of a major retail store I noticed a few orchid plants that were in fairly distressed condition and nearly falling out of their pots. I offered the assistant \$10 for them and I had purchased my first orchids!

I took the orchids home, repotted them, and was surprised at how well they recovered. Within a year a couple of them had flowered. Well this was easy! I started to buy a few more and before long I had sought out a local orchid nursery. Each week or two I would carefully sift through the trays of seedlings on offer, selecting those that were double planted. I figured, why pay for one seedling if you could get two, or sometimes a bonus three, for the same price.

After a year or so of orchid growing I joined the local orchid society and made a lot of friends with a similar interest in growing these plants, and over time and with a bit of guidance I started to get some good quality plants, often growing them from back-cuts that some of the older growers had given to me.

At about this time a couple of the Society members set up a commercial orchid flasking lab and I was intrigued by the process. All those little plants growing in a bottle! I bought a few flasks and realised that here was a solution to my limited budget. Seedlings were a lot cheaper by the flask and who cares if it takes a year or two longer to flower them. I was still young and time was irrelevant.

A career change brought me to Hervey Bay and I immediately joined the local Orchid Society, which had only recently formed. At a workshop a grower from Brisbane spoke about orchid flasking at home, and I was hooked. His basic equipment was a polystyrene box without the lid, holes cut in the front for the hands to go in, and a sheet of glass for a lid. The flasks were just glass honey bottles and the media was a recipe of a few ingredients which could be made up in the kitchen. I decided to try it and after a bit of trial and error I had some success. At first only a few flasks without contamination, then a few more, and eventually nearly 100% success as the technique was refined. I have now produced thousands of plants and I still use the same basic equipment and the same recipe today.

So what does this all have to do with my dear old mother-in-law? Well she passed away a few years ago, and I thought about what I could do to keep her memory alive? It was obvious; I could name an orchid hybrid that I had made in her honour. Not many people get to do that!

Hobby orchid hybridisers have a special role in orchid growing. We can take more risks, attempt unlikely crosses, and nurture just a handful of seedlings that may have germinated. This is especially so with *Paphiopedilums*. Commercial growers can't really justify those odds. For them the hybrids

have to sell and a handful of seedlings of a particular cross are not a viable option in a catalogue. In the history of orchid growing there have been many instances where hobby hybridisers have produced exceptional orchids, often more by good luck than good management, but advancement never the less.

Making an orchid hybrid is not difficult. It is just a matter of introducing the pollen of one flower onto the stigma of another. Many hobby hybridisers then send the mature seed pod to a lab and in a year or so get some flasks sent back to them. This is like missing out on the first year of a newborn baby's life! Imagine your wife giving birth, and then going back a year later to pick up the baby from the hospital (not a bad idea I hear some say!). To take an orchid hybrid from pollination to flowering the progeny at home is a journey requiring some patience and a little extra effort.

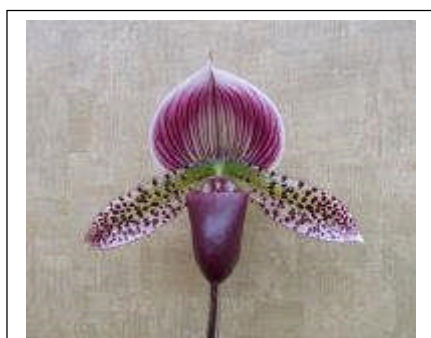
I have made dozens of hybrids, all produced out of a polystyrene box with minimal expense. Some have been awarded and some have been pretty ordinary, but a few have been consistently good, in my opinion. An example is *Paphiopedilum Memoria Doris Behrendorff*, which I named in honour of my mother-in-law. Three cultivars are shown in the photos below.



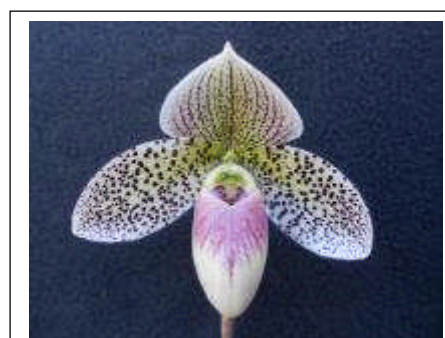
This was an unlikely combination of *Paph. Black Stallion*, a tall dark maudiae type, and *Paph. Sally Berndt*, a white flower with fine dark speckling, but with a fairly short inflorescence. The aim was to get a taller flower spike and the hope was to get some white coloured flowers. There was no study of the genetics behind this cross when I did it, but I knew *Paph. Sally Berndt* was made up of the three species *sukhakulii*, *godefroyae* and *niveum*. The cross just seemed like a good idea at the time!

The result was indeed taller flower spikes than *Paph. Sally Berndt*, but to my surprise the dozen or so that have flowered so far have all had a white background with various degrees of pink flush and with large dark spots, presumably from the *Paph. sukhakulii* and *Paph. godefroyae* in the background.

Of course, I had already been able to name another *Paphiopedilum* hybrid in honour of my own mum a few years earlier (below left), and based on the first flowering of another new hybrid, I will almost certainly name it after my dad if the quality is consistently good in the grex (below right). It is a cross of *Paph. Macabre Chant* with *Paph. Sally Berndt*. The influence of *Paph. Sally Berndt* is obviously very strong. How exciting it is to see that first flower of your own hybrid open!



*Paph.* named for my mum



*Paph.* to be named for my dad

Hybridising is just another aspect of orchid growing but it adds an exciting dimension to this wonderful hobby. Not done for monetary gain, but for love. Not done because I have to, but because I can!