

Essay Competition 2013 3rd Prize Winner

“HOW I BECAME INTERESTED IN ORCHIDS”

By Arthur Stafford

How did I become interested in orchids? No doubt a familiar thought to all orchid monomaniacs despite their denials to the contrary that orchids are an addiction; even an affliction to one's own natural good and sane behaviour. The Mental Health Departments of all States, Territories and Nations should be most concerned about this ailment. Me. I'm not addicted. In fact, I do not consider myself an orchidaceous person. I am just a collector with a mission. I will not let them die when I find them in the bush on downed trees exposed to the plundering of stock and wild life, lying under collapsed embankments of creeks or in front of a charging bulldozer. I save them, treat them and grow them on so that I can just stand and gaze at the wonders of these beautiful, wondrous and tenacious plants. When I have too many of one particular type, I sell them to other, sane interested persons. However, I only wish I could enthuse all Australians to embrace their very own treasures but, ALAS! *"They are too small. They are not big enough."* - to parade before one's distinguished visitors - *"They are only Australian orchids"*.

I do not scoff too loudly at others though, as I have not always considered orchids to be spectacular or interesting or even worthy of collecting in a serious way. One sees them in every nursery and variety store around the country. Big, flashy, showy, beautiful and over priced. Constantly they die after you get them home or when the flowers have disintegrated and the plants are thrown into the rubbish bin after a few weeks of neglect. These are the cultivated, generically engineered and exotic plants not necessarily suited to our climate, or bought by well meaning persons, who did not seek the likes of the recipient, before wasting their money on an unwanted gift.

In the early 1990s I went to England and stopped over in Singapore. I opted to remain within the airport precinct and spent a number of hours in the most sickly atmosphere that I have ever encountered, before or since. All because of orchids. They were everywhere. Hundreds of them. Climbing columns, trailing down from hanging baskets, in every hue and size. It did nothing to excite my desire to become interested in them.

After becoming disillusioned with my profession of almost thirty years, I opted for a life-change experience and purchased a small property on the edge of a small, little known mountain range. My son and I worked hard putting up fences to make paddocks and whipping the place into shape. I began transforming the property from the tree and shrub denuded, Lantana and other exotic weed covered paddocks, to what it seemed the countryside might have been before being cleared and used as cattle grazing land by the previous owner. To do this, I walked many kilometres on neighbouring properties collecting plant specimens for the Herbarium to identify. I began purchasing these indigenous species from community nurseries as well as collecting the local seed, growing seedlings and planting them out. This pleasurable wandering began my grudgingly slow interest in orchids and as in a long ago learned quote, my neurosis started:

"IF. A very small word of infinite, intellectual significance. It indicates actions commenced but not yet completed, with the possibility of alternative outcomes." (Author unknown)

GOALS, ACHIEVEMENTS, DILEMMAS, DISAPPOINTMENTS

IF during March 2001, a neighbour had not decided to move out of the district and lumber me with a number of large cultivated exotic orchids in beautiful terracotta pots, I might have been allowed to stumble along in my blissful unawareness of these magnificent plants. They were a Cymbidium variety with fancy names like "Black Prince" and "Mirretta", or similar. They did have labels stating their cultivation details when I was given them, but like any other uninterested person who has reluctantly accepted a gift from another, the labels became lost and the orchids were placed at the back of a nursery for a considerable period of time and neglected. What a delight when two years later they flowered with long canes of many flowers in coarse dark blotched and dull gleaming cream petals. The flower was almost as large as a hand and had a delicate cologne. I moved them to a more prominent place so that I could view them at will whilst working nearby. Alas! They deteriorated and started to "die" within a few weeks. This was one of my first lessons. If an orchid plant does not like the area in which it has been placed, it will not perform and will most probably die or fall away in quality. Back they went to the rear of the nursery and there they remain. I have since divided and re-potted many of these magnificent plants and they all stand in pride every year and like a child with a new toy, I show them to all my family members and visitors when they are in flower.



IF I had not followed that fire-break track along a ridge-line that mild day in August 2002, I would not have seen those old dead logs lying across the track, one with strange spatular leaves and dumpy pseudobulbs of about fifteen centimetres in length, growing at what would have been the top of the tree in



times past and on another log nearby, a spindly plant with thin ribbed pseudobulbs growing on the underside with most of the plant crushed and dead. As this timber would have been shattered and pushed aside by the bulldozer when next clearing the fire-line the plants would have been destroyed, so I brought them into the nursery, potted them up with what litter and soil I had available and put them next to the previously mentioned plants. They have been divided and re-potted into a number of different mixtures since and have been moved to different locations to achieve a positive result. The slender plant flowers profusely every year and was later identified by EPA Officers as *Dendrobium x*

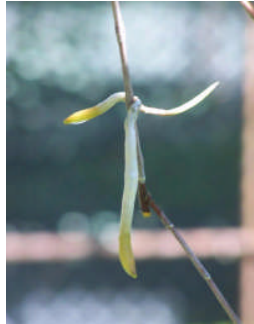
gracillimum and one of the best coloured specimens they had seen. Whilst the other plant is still strong and very healthy, it has not increased in overall size nor has it ever flowered. It seems to be happy just making new plants and it has been tentatively identified as *Dendrobium speciosum*, but until it flowers the variety will remain a mystery. It is the first plant I inspect every morning as I walk through my nursery sheds and maybe, just maybe, one day I will be rewarded with some beautiful, rare, not previously seen, exotically coloured flowers.



IF I had not walked up a Lantana choked gully in early April 2003 looking for a missing cow, I would not have found a veritable mini rainforest that extended for about eight hundred metres to a rocky cliff face covered in *Hoya australis* vine and many different types of native ferns. A very old, long dead Moreton Bay Fig tree (*Ficus macrophylla*) was about half way along this gully. All of its bark and branches were lying at, or near its base. On these broken shards of thick bark were growing strange plants I had not seen before. They were made up of short, thin round stems (with no "leaves") and the plant was about twenty centimetres long. As I moved the broken pieces of the tree around, I found dozens more of this plant as well as one I did know, the Tick Orchid (*Dockrillia linguiformis*). I

gathered them all up and brought them back to the farm, forgetting the rest of my search for the missing animal - the first missed signs of a derangement.

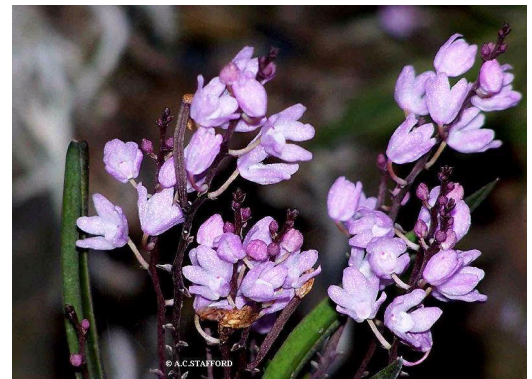
I had noted how these plants grew on the bark from the fig tree and those plants that were still securely attached to the shards were hung in my nursery whilst those that had become separated, were secured to pieces of board and broken tree branches, as well as on the trunks of trees growing along the creek that runs through our property. Despite some losses, many of them survived and flowered every year. I later had the plant identified by the Herbarium as the "Scrubby Pencil" Orchid (*Dockrillia bowmanii*). Its stiff, arrogant leaves and flowers



of green and white are a delight to view. Despite most of them surviving the 2010-2011 floods, the remaining trees were taken away in the January floods, just past. However, the plants I had mounted on epi-boards and on the trees above the creek level, are growing quite happily and one plant in the nursery has thrown "keiki roots" along a stem. I am told that this is not unusual, but it is something I have not seen them do before.



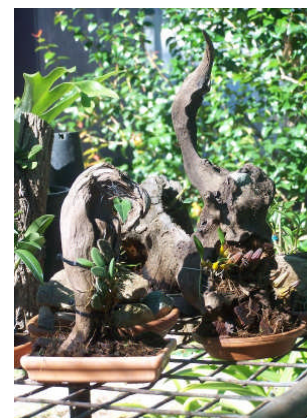
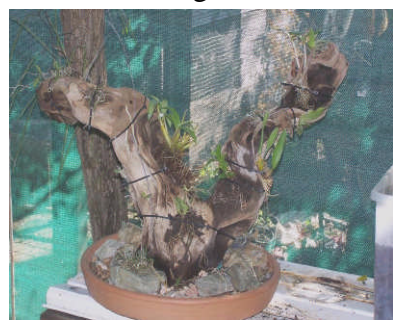
IF my son and I had not gone hunting on the nearby ranges in mid January 2004 and had not followed a small group of Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*) down a ridge and into a creek bed, I would not have seen in the collapsed banks, hundreds of small pinkish flowering plants. The colour was in many hues from a very pale pink to a dark lilac. On looking around at the nearby rocks and banks I saw more of these little plants growing everywhere. Being urged on by my son to go after the deer, I marked the place in my mind and some weeks later returned to the area to find most of the downed plants missing or dead. I gathered what remained and brought them into the nursery and secured them to creek rocks, epi-boards and planted them in pots. I have since found many of these plants lying along the banks of the creek's upper reaches having been brought down by animals scrambling down the banks to drink at waterholes. Bringing them in, I soon had hundreds scattered around the nurseries in pots and on rocks. They flower profusely and always have numerous seed pods which have caused many new plants to come up under the benches on the moist ground. These are my darlings; the Fairy Bell Orchid (*Sarcochilus ceciliae*).



IF I had not cut up a long-downed Ironbark tree (*Eucalyptus crebra*) for firewood in the Winter of 2005, I would not have found the stiff-leaved plants growing in the hollows and cracks along its length. I had often seen this type of plant growing on dead and living trees in full sun, always green and standing stiffly to attention in all directions. Guessing that it was the so called "Bush Orchid", I brought all of the plants in and potted them in the core material from the tree that I had cut up. Not knowing how to handle or treat them properly before potting, I had removed all of the roots attached to the pseudobulbs and made a discovery that has held me in good stead when dealing with this plant and some of the other "coarser" growing species. It was not long before I had numerous new shoots and vigorous growing plants that flower profusely in many colours and shapes at the end of each year. This is probably when the "itch" really began and I have been scratching it ever since. The plants were later identified for me by ANOS members as the Channel-Leaf Orchid (*Cymbidium canaliculatum*). They have been my consuming passion ever since and I have gone out of my way to study this plant in the wild and I have tried numerous ways to cultivate it with various success and failure. I have also tried to enthuse other persons, who claim they are "orchid lovers", into its limitless beauty and toughness, but most of those who have seen the plant in the wild describe it as "an unsightly cluster of chewed leaves and dead bulbs on the sides of trees". They have not seen the flowering plants up close to discover their grandeur and beauty, the variety and shape of their petals.

I have collected a number of wild grown seed pods and along with the pods of my own "cultivated" plants; I have commenced experimenting with natural-growing techniques. I now have many seedlings growing in the method I have devised and will continue to grow them in profusion. By providing healthy flowering plants of this species to other orchid collectors and the general public at a low cost, my aim is to try and lessen some of the wholesale removal and destruction of this plant and its habitat in the wild. However, convincing a land-holder to leave the standing dead trees with these plants growing in them is an almost impossible task. They only see a dead tree. They do not see a "garden bed", or the home for birds and other animals that use them.

IF I had not visited a commercial orchid grower's nursery during the latter part of 2005 to purchase some orchids and get some "free" advice, I would not have been told about a man who used to grow orchids on many different types of mounts and in trays of all descriptions. Being new to orchid growing, I must have shown my scepticism because the owner took me to an aside nursery and showed me King Orchids (*Dendrobium speciosum*) growing in terracotta trays. They appeared to me, to be very old and they were very large, towering above and overflowing the sides of the trays. I was told that the plants were over thirty years old and had never been removed from the trays in all that time. I was shown other arrangements of "unnatural" growing styles. I often wonder at the tenacity of the orchid plant to survive and adapt to any situation and I have turned this curiosity into practise and regularly wander the creek banks turning over flood debris to find odd bits of wood dumped under them. After cleaning the wood and attaching it to a tray, I mount an orchid, or more, depending on the size of the mount, to see if I can make that one startling centre piece, an



objet d'art - the *pièce de résistance*. Oh! The lunacy that makes us want to torture these innocent plants, to bend them to our will, to turn them into curiosities.

IF in June 2006, my wife had not given me a modern computer, scanner, printer and digital camera, I would have more time to do the manual, meaningful farm work I am supposed to be doing. I revised the long ago learned profession of photography and have taken hundreds of photographs of orchid plants in their natural setting and in my own nursery and paddocks. Many hundreds of photographs of orchid flowers, petals, labellum, leaves, bulbs, seed pods, insects and habitats have been taken of many different local native orchids and the images mystically grow on my computer, causing considerable slow-downs and crashes, much to the annoyance of my wife and other family users of the machine.

These modern devices also opened up a large area for research on orchids and other plants and on how to grow them. Along came the Internet; THE WEB. A wonderful tool but a great waster of time. I found out



that the use of charcoal in one's orchid potting mix was preferable to the modern day use of foam cubes and other substitute particles and I began to make charcoal. At first it was for my own use and then others learnt of my talent and orders began coming in from local enthusiasts. I knew it was not wise to include it in a web site advertising my nursery but never the less I did and away went more valuable "farming time". One week gathering sufficient timber, one day loading and burning, three days waiting for it too cool and two days sieving and bagging. Not to mention the lost time in dispatching the product from a rural area.

I perused all the various methods involved in such an undertaking (on THE WEB) and learnt the true art of making this wonderful commodity. Pits were dug. Timber was gleaned from all of my neighbours and their bulldozed stacks decreased in size as I brought in the dead timber from kilometres around. Hot, dusty and time consuming, this activity occupied days at a time as I perfected the art of making this wonderful commodity, sieving it by hand and then bagging it up for delivery to customers. Calls came in from Darwin, Newcastle, Buninyong, Townsville, Gladstone and many other places I had not heard of

before. Making up pallets to send multiple bags off to far away places began to give me recurring nightmares and of course, my own orchid collection and the farm began to suffer for want of care. As other charcoal makers were closed down by the authorities in other States, the increase in demand became too great for me to handle alone, so I had to refrain from making it in large quantities and now do only that which is sufficient for my own use.



IF in May 2007 I had not taken a telephone message to my neighbour who was working his bulldozer in the nearby mountainous country putting in fire trails and a gully dam, I would not have spent three days feverishly searching downed trees and bushes, being stung and scratched and avoiding the lumbering machine, to rescue many varieties of orchids. It took me a month to sort, prune, board and pot them. Fortunately they are a very understanding plant and need no special care for a short time until mounted or potted. A nice cool, airy, moist spot and they continue to survive. I also took time out to collect specimens of other plants in the area to have identified by the Herbarium - another fanatical enterprise of mine. Amongst the plants collected were some very large clumps of King Orchids (*Dendrobium speciosum* var. *hillii*). These took days to divide (I actually had to use a chainsaw on one clump as it was too big to divide by hand) and pot the resulting smaller plants up.



The "legal" clearing of country like this, is one of the blights of our Government agencies. There must be a change in Government thinking to compel land-holders doing such activities, which they have a right to undertake in most cases, to obtain the services of licensed "collectors" and "salvagers" and have them available to collect orchids and other species of plants that may be vulnerable, before and during their operations. How many natural plots of known and undiscovered terrestrial orchids have been destroyed in the past? How many epiphyte orchids are lost when trees are pushed into heaps, left to die or be burnt, from these land clearing activities? Current and proposed legislative changes in this State's clearing laws will lead to the "wholesale destruction" of our most precious commodity, our very own orchids and other native plants.

IF only I knew then what I know now. I would not have thrown away any of the single canes that had no roots, when severed from the root base whilst dividing up plants, based on the misguided advice of others that they would not re-grow or survive. I would now have many more plants to pot out and admire. One day in an annoyed tantrum at such waste, I planted a number of these "useless" canes in a self-made potting mix and have now successfully produced a number of healthy specimens. Oh! the waste of the past will be corrected in the future.



IF only the steer had not broken into the nursery area and eaten most of my two metre long Bridal Veil Orchid (*Dockrillia teretifolia*), which was hanging from the Red Cedar tree (*Toona ciliata*), it might have gone on to become a more valuable asset!