



CULTURE FOR NATIVE *DENDROBIUM* ORCHIDS INCLUDING *DENDROBIUM SPECIOSUM*

Possibly the most spectacular Australian native orchid is *Dendrobium speciosum*, spectacular in the sense that it is large and showy both in plant habit and floriferousness. The epithet, speciosum, literally means showy and splendid. A more apt description could hardly have been given.

Because of this showy nature, it is often the first native orchid acquired by the novice and knowing little about the plant's natural habitat, the grower is often disappointed when it does not flower under their growing conditions. This orchid requires plenty of light at all time and at certain times of the year, full sunlight with no overhead shading.

HABITAT

Den. speciosum is a widespread and variable species distributed from North-eastern Victoria to Cape York Peninsula in North Queensland. In most instances, it grows in exposed positions preferring rocks to trees as a host, in fact, the common name for the species in N.S.W. is 'rock lily' and in North Queensland 'king orchid'. In the tropics it shows a preference for the ranges and the tablelands but in the temperate regions it is commonly found on the lowlands as well as on the ranges.

As mentioned, *Den. speciosum* prefers rocks to trees as a host and in the N.S.W. Hawksbury sandstone region, huge clumps grow on the cliffs facing in a south easterly direction where they get the full force of wind and rain and are exposed to the first half of the day's sun. In the instances where they do grow on trees, they are found at the edges of the rain forest almost always exposed to the elements.

VARIETIES

Den. speciosum is a species with many varieties, some of which are discussed briefly below. Often these varietal names are on the plant label when purchased, however, it should be pointed out that even within the varieties, much variation occurs and the only way to obtain the form and colour you require is to purchase it while in flower, not always easy to do.

The type of species is *Den. speciosum var speciosum* having pseudobulbs from 45mm to 1 metre in length, being fairly thick and slightly swollen in the middle, tapering off at the apex where there are 2 to 5 thick leathery leaves. The racemes arise from the nodes near the top of the stem and are 10cm to 60cm long containing many highly perfumed 25mm to 35mm flowers varying from fully open to partly open white, cream or yellow flowers with red or purple spots on the labellum.

Den. speciosum var hillii. The pseudobulbs of this variety are slender and up to 1 metre tall with very long, leathery leaves to 30cm in length. The inflorescences are 45 to 60cm long and consist of numerous crowded flowers. the flowers are about 25mm long, highly perfumed and usually white to cream.

Den. speciosum var pedunculatum. This variety was previously named *Den. compactum* and many plants are still around with that name on the labels, both varietals named are descriptive of the plant with the former name referring to the long peduncle or flower stalk which displays the individual flowers on the raceme. The inflorescence is long with many flowers crowded on the raceme. The flowers are of a good shape, varying in color from white through to yellow, this variety has been extensively used in hybridizing programs both for its compact size and good flower shape.

Den. speciosum var grandiflorum. Similar to var hillii but flowers are a little larger, better shaped and more spaced on the raceme. This species is restricted in its natural habitat to a narrow coastal strip of Northern N.S.W. and Southern Queensland. A desirable variety, but sometimes difficult to obtain.

CULTURE

Den. speciosum can be grown mounted or in a pot, but be aware of the potential size of a mature specimen if deciding to mount your plant. The fully-grown orchid can be over 1 metre across and weigh several kilograms. For this reason, it is best grown in a pot. As with all Dendrobiums, do not over pot. It is unwise to pot plants consisting of 2 or 3 stems into a 50cm container to save time and trouble. A pot just large enough to give, at most, 2 or 3 years growth should be used, potting on

into the next largest pot as required. A good free drainage compost should be used consisting of any, or a mixture of, pine bark, fir bark, charcoal, scoria, pebbles etc. adding a small quantity of bone meal as a slow release fertilizer completes the mixture. Potting is best done just as the orchid is starting its growth period which can be anytime between October and December. At that time of the year through to April, grow under 50% shade, no more, and keep up the watering. In April when the sun has lost its intensity, place the orchid in full sunlight position until flowering time, around September. when in bloom it should be placed under some kind of covering to protect the flowers from weather damage.

Pests do not present much of a problem, as the leaves are far too thick and leathery to be attacked by caterpillars etc. Watch out for slugs and snails which regard developing and fully developed flowers as a special treat.

Den speciosum is an easy and rewarding orchid to grow and should have a place in every collection.