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Aussie Orchids Factsheet - Gardening Australia - ABC

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Aussie Orchids

Presenter: John Patrick [13/9/2002]

Australian native orchids have smaller flowers than their exotic counterparts, but their flowers have an attractive delicate beauty, with many species being fragrant and extremely colourful. These dendrobiums and sarcochilus are unique to east and southeast Australia and grow from the Cape York Peninsula to Tasmania and as far west as South Australia.

It is remarkable that around 10% of the world's flowering plants are orchids, but in Australia the number is proportionately a little smaller. About 4% of our flowering plants are orchids, but there are still over 600 species, and with the constant hybridisation of them there are many hundreds to choose from.

Wayne Turville has been growing these orchids for over 25 years because they are unique and a fascinating challenge to hybridise. There is more mystique to the lesser-known Australian orchids. The results of breeding are highly unpredictable, and finding new unique shapes, sizes and colours is exciting.

In the wild, Australian orchids are mostly either epiphytes growing on the bark of trees or shrubs, or lithophytes growing on wet cliff-faces or boulders. Their aerial roots are covered with velamen, a very absorbent layer that allows them to collect all available moisture. Their growth form can be monopodial, growing from one point upward or sympodial, growing from rhizomes. Not surprisingly the Australian aborigines used these plants for different purposes. The pseudobulbs, the thickened part of the stems of some species provided them with food, others were used as a fixative for cave and bark paintings. Other species, when dried in the sun produced a fibre that could be used in weaving.

In south-eastern Australia temperatures between 2 degrees and 42 degrees are tolerable for orchids. To grow orchids to perfection, the ideal environment should have shade cloth walls to prevent damage from harsh winds, a solid roof to keep out the winter rain and grown in an area that has bright light and good ventilation. Orchids have almost the same hardiness as succulents.

Orchids thrive when they are crowded in a pot. If the plant needs dividing, propagation is very simple. Remove the plant from its pot and shake the compost from around the roots. Gently move the plant around until you feel a point where your thumbs can easily pull the plant apart. It is always better to use your hands rather than a cutting implement, because cutting implements can carry viral diseases. Choose a broad shallow pot with plenty of drainage and centre the new division in the pot, filling it with a mix of composted pine bark, hardwood charcoal and volcanic scoria. The plant will grow happily in this pot for another year or two with the addition of a few pellets of slow release fertiliser.

Some of the colours of the new hybrids have never been seen before. ***Dendrobium Victorian Regency*** has an intense burgundy colour and a beautiful starry shape. ***Dendrobium (Rutherford Sunspot x Zoom)*** has splashy purple colourings with off-white. ***Dendrobium Tosca*** is a beautiful new hybrid developed in NSW by David Butler. It has a refined shape with an intense bright burgundy colour and is one of the best new hybrids. Another star-shaped or spider orchid is ***Dendrobium Bellinger River***, a hybrid produced with burnished oranges and terracotta reds, colours never seen before in these orchids. ***Dendrobium Star of Gold*** is one of the most intensely perfumed of the Australian orchids, is overpowering in spring when there is extra warmth in the air. ***Dendrobium (Glamour x Star)*** is an easy one to grow with masses of lemon and lavender flowers. One of the new hot-cold hybrids ***Dendrobium Burgundy Cream*** has a colour whose intensity cannot be surpassed. ***Dendrobium Hilda Poxon*** is a tropical variety that has large spikes of beautiful golden spidery flowers.

Don't collect orchids from the bush, it is an unsustainable practice. Go to a specialist orchid grower or nursery where there will be a multitude of beautiful plants bred in hundreds of different colours to choose from. They are in flower from August, September and October and so these months are an ideal time to choose them. With a little patience they will grow into the large specimens that orchid growers have on display.

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