

What is a ‘Historical’ Orchid?

When looking at seed grown plants from new breeding, there is a market price level, which is fairly uniform. If we then look at meristem propagation, from known good, and usually awarded, plants, the prices are slightly higher for these known high quality orchids.

Then, as the years go by, the plants that were widely available just a few years ago become harder to find, and after 10-20 years it is as if they never existed. Due to advances in current breeding, it is unlikely that any nursery will make a repeat meristem production of these slightly older plants. At this point, even divisions of meristems start to command premium prices (see Ebay listings from Waldor Orchids).

I recently attended Dave Off's backyard orchid sale. Aside from buying too many plants (again), I was introduced to a *Cattleya* species I was not at all familiar with, and subsequently I overheard a conversation between Dave and one of the other customers, concerning the value of ‘historical’ plants. This got me to thinking, and then writing.

There are many reasons for an older plant to be considered desirable, and eventually, historical.

Age + History

Orchids can live forever, if we take proper care of the plants. The plant I didn't know, was *C. speciocissima*. It was introduced in an auction in England, way back in 1868, and awarded an AM by the RHS in 1901. However, today it is recognized as a synonym for *C. lueddemiana*.

Dave had several divisions of the original plant, that was awarded in 1901 (one of which found its way home with me). While the flower quality won't measure up to today's standards for line bred *C. lueddemiana*, the history that is attached to this particular plant, makes it a worthwhile member of any serious *Cattleya* collection.



Another example of a historic cultivar of a species is found in *Paphiopedilum insigne*, var. ‘Harefield Hall’ (right), which has significantly larger flowers than the standard form (left), due to the plant being polyploid (either 3N or 4N). This cultivar has been documented back to 1894; it is hard to find today, and usually carries a premium price when available.

With many of the historical orchid nurseries closing over the past 40-50 years, their unique orchid collections have been dispersed, and in some cases possibly lost forever. Fortunately some of the best plants can still be found at a few specialty nurseries and in private collections.



One such plant is *C. percivaliana* ‘Summit’ FCC/AOS. This plant came from the now defunct Lager & Hurrell nursery in Summit, NJ, which closed in 1975. Dave has it, so Kyle & I were able to pick up a meristem division at the backyard sale.



There are historical hybrids as well. Not as well known, but from the same nursery, comes the delightful *Bc. Edna* ‘Summit’ (*B. nodosa* x *C. coccinea*). This is a select clone, which was never meristem propagated.

It survived in the collection of a former L&H employee, and I obtained it from him. It is a vigorous plant, so I have been able to make some divisions available over the last 2-3 years.

A much earlier classic hybrid is ***Epicattleya Veitchii*** (*Epi. radicans* x *Sophr. coccinea*, registered in 1890 as an *Epiphronitis*). Even though the flowers are only a moderate improvement over the *Epi. radicans* parent, the plant stature is much more compact. This is



another vigorous grower, and the plant is still around today. I recently obtained three top cuttings from a grower in Hawaii, for less than \$20 each.

In other cases, there can be a clear flower quality difference. The first Paphiopedilum hybrid registered back in 1869 was ***Paph. Harrisianum*** (*barbatum* x *villosum*). That in itself makes it a collectable.

The best Harrisianum is 'Superbum', also called G.S.Ball's variety. It is unclear whether this plant dates back to the original seed pod, as this cross has been repeated since. Mr. G. S. Ball was an active orchid grower in the late 19th century and early 20th century; the first mention of 'Superbum' in print appears shortly after WWI, so I suspect it originates from a remake. It is still the most desirable form of this grex.



Plants from famous growers collections

Some years ago, I purchased several *Laelias* from SBOE. In addition to 3 or 4 select *L. anceps* clones, I also wanted one ***L. gouldiana***. I had a choice between a plant without any specific pedigree for \$25, and one that came from the late Raymond Burr's orchid collection (clonal name 'Greta Garbo'). Greta carried a \$35 price tag at the time.



I couldn't really detect any flower quality difference, but felt that the 'named' clone was worth the extra ten dollars.

Important breeding plants

Whether you intend to breed with them or not, there is a certain satisfaction in owning a piece of a plant, that moved the breeding programs forward.

Cattleya: There are many candidates. One example is ***C. Horace Maxima' AM/AOS*** (*C. trianae* x *Woltersiana*, registered in 1938). It is still used extensively in breeding today, as it imparts great shape to the offspring, while usually allowing the color from the other parent to dominate. I have one plant in my breeding collection, and have recently obtained several more plants from Hawaii.



Cymbidium: One of the foundation plants used to create most of the modern hybrids, is ***Cym. Alexanderi***, a near primary hybrid (*ebourneolowianum* x *insigne*, registered 1911).

The best clone from the original cross is 'Westonbirt' FCC/AOS (a spontaneous tetraploid, as are many of the best breeders in all genera).



Paphiopedilum: There are many candidates in this genus. I have selected 3 choices:

Paph. Leeanum (*insigne* x *spicerianum*, registered in 1884). This primary hybrid is in the background of more than 90% of the modern complex hybrids. It is an extremely vigorous plant, which can grow into specimen size very quickly. The photo at the top of the next column shows a specimen plant exhibited at The Slipper Forum in DC about 15 years ago.





Paph. Hellas 'Westonbirt'

(Desdemona x Tania, registered in 1940). This honey colored hybrid almost always improves the shape in the progeny, while it usually lets the color from the other parent dominate. Despite it being an aging lady, it is still used in breeding today.



Paph. Winston Churchill (Eridge x Hampden, registered in 1951). While their flower quality characteristics are debatable (the flower quality fluctuates considerably with environmental changes), these two clones dramatically improved the number of seedlings produced from each pod (from dozens into hundreds, or even more).



W.C. 'Indomitable'



W.C. 'Redoubtable'

Rare Varieties

In species we occasionally find true rarities, such as:



An albescens form of *Vanda lamellata*, var. *boxallii*.

This flower is distinctly different from the standard form (below).



Even more rare is the aurea form of *Cattleya amethystoglossa*.

Provided that it is not meristem propagated, divisions of the original plant are highly sought after - and historical.



Mother Division vs Meristem

Paphiopedilum and *Phragmipediums* cannot be reliably meristem propagated. In these genera only Mother Divisions are available. For certain closely held breeding plants, the price for single growth divisions can reach the \$3-5K range.

In most other genera, meristem propagation is possible. Thus, we can get meristem copies at a fairly reasonable price a few years after the initial introduction.

However, since repeat meristem propagations (in particular those based on a meristem, rather than a true Mother Division) can evidence some mutations, there is always a demand for 'Mother Divisions' from the original plants.

Such divisions typically carry price tags in the \$75-\$400 range. In the *Cattleya* group, Waldor Orchids, Chadwick & Sons Orchids, and Odom's Orchids are some of the best sources for mother divisions of classical *Cattleya*.