

SPECIOSUM SPECULATIONS

By Gerry Walsh

It seems to me that there is something of a revival of interest afoot with regards to good old *Dendrobium speciosum*. Some of you may say that this is hog-wash; that there has never really been a waning in the interest surrounding this very common and probably best known of Australia's native orchids. But the popular journals of orchidology, including those that deal mostly with imported hybrids, have lately been giving more than a fair share of space to the humble old 'Rock Lily'. There are, in my opinion, three completely different lines of reasoning accounting for this. What can these reasons be, I hear you cry ... in your ceaseless search for truth, and for wisdom, and for inner peace?

First and foremost, we can heap a good deal of the blame on the shoulders of our botanists and scientists. Their factional, and at times individual, interpretations of the recipe book of botanical practice and protocol, has really thrown a spanner at the previously accepted order of things. I do not profess to have enough scientific understanding to add weight to any of the recently published arguments on *D. speciosum* and its varieties, or sub-species, or whatever.

But I will say that I felt entirely comfortable with the long-standing practice of giving the types of *D. speciosum* the status of "variety". My personal preference, quite naturally, should have no bearing whatsoever on what the professional botanists eventually decide to do. So, you guys, do not start trembling in your boots or losing any sleep over concern for my feelings in all this; just carry on as you see fit. While ever I have got a few good clones in my bushhouse, the speciosum battle does not ruffle my feathers one bit ... so let the war drums beat.

On top of all this botanical drama, which really does make Dynasty and Dallas seem like re-runs of I Love Lucy, the orchid tabloids have recently been sprouting forth with features on new colour combinations for *D. speciosum*. Not all native enthusiasts believe this is necessarily an advancement however.

About twelve years ago a clone of *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* sporting reddish spots on its sepals and petals, was collected at Mangrove Creek when they cleared that area for the Mangrove Creek Dam. This started a few native growers going like babes, but because the other floral qualities of the clone were mostly a judge's nightmare, the masses remained quite underwhelmed.

Then, after a seven or eight year span, a few more spotted clones barnstormed onto the scene. Sid Batchelor had one of his gracing the cover of the Australian Orchid Review. This was a much better clone than the Mangrove Creek one and it happened to be a *D. speciosum* var. *curvicaule* from North Queensland to boot. We next read of a consortium of growers from northern New South Wales who have three or four such clones - again *D. speciosum* var. *curvicaule*. These gents are apparently raising siblings of these clones and intend to make them commercially accessible.

Next thing we know, David Banks announces that he has just flowered another two clones of the spotted kind. These were collected years ago as unflowered seedlings from the lower Hawkesbury district. It now looks as if David is fostering his own version of the bubonic plague - the spots epidemic has spread to one of his clones of *D. speciosum* var. *pedunculatum*.

If these spotted/blotched types can be made to procreate themselves and still manage to look respectable alongside normal-coloured speciosums in respect to shape and habit, we may open up a huge new field of hybrids. No doubt we would see a lot of remakes of the older style of hybrids ... and why not?

So far I have dealt with the recent technical afflictions swamping *D. speciosum*, as well as the bizarre horticultural occurrence of spotted freaks, for freaks are all they are. But has there been any new development in the old-style, traditional *D. speciosum*?

The broad answer is yes. Of course, with a species such as *D. speciosum*, any development has to be slow. With only one exception that springs to mind, all the really top clones of *D. speciosum* originated from wild sources. The exception is a selfing of the well-known *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* 'National White' HCC/OSNSW. At the recent Port Hacking Group's Spring Show, there was a superb specimen of this selfing that was superior in every way to

the wild-collected division sitting next to it.

This demonstrates perfectly the value of doing sibling crosses, even if you have to wait a decade or so to see if the effort was worth it. A few growers I can think of waited 15 years or more for their selfings of *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* 'National White' to bloom, and promptly got rid of them. They had small, creamy flowers typical of any old plant that you would not look sideways at in the bush. But some did turn out very good, so give them a chance.

There are a lot of seedlings of a selfing of *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* 'Windermere' around the village of Sydney, and a fair percentage of these must turn out to be top notch. I have not heard of any of them flowering as yet, or any other well-known clones either for that matter. There must be more than a few of the earliest sibling crosses approaching maturity by now, so the next few years should turn up a good one or three. Every grower should have a dozen good siblings at all stages from seedlings up to flowering size, in their bushhouses. You may be the one to hit the jackpot in a big way. Most of us would love to put our names on the best of some species or hybrid before we all topple off our perches and join up with Orpheus in the underworld.

Dendrobium speciosum is very nearly the only species used extensively in hybridising that has not as yet been improved by line breeding. We are still using wild collected clones as parents. *Dendrobium falcorostrum*, is pretty much in the same boat. In the past few years, we have seen advances in the line breeding of *D. kingianum*, *D. tetragonum*, *Sarcochilus hartmannii* and *S. ceciliae* that can only be described as incredible. We have now reached the stage where the hobbyist can go into a nursery and buy a seedling of each of these four species that can be virtually guaranteed to turn out superior to anything still growing in the wild condition. This is a proven fact, and the ultimate in the conservation of species.

Dendrobium speciosum is about to join this select group as well. There are a lot of sibling crosses of it in flask right now, and in the next few years they should be freely available. These have all been made using only the top one or two percent of the clones in cultivation. All of these parents originated in the wild, and it seems appropriate that a few words be written about wild clones at this point.

Nearly all my bush tripping these days is done in September - the sole purpose being to search out superior forms of *D. speciosum*. This particularly applies to the past four years. In this time I have gone as far afield as Wyong, and down as far as Batemans Bay, and nearly everywhere in between. I have seen many thousands of plants in flower. But I have only seen about thirty plants worth collecting divisions from in that time. That is an average of about one plant in about every hundred seen in flower. When it comes to *D. speciosum*, you must be extremely selective.

Some time ago, I was sitting on a rock in the bush with Mike Harrison. I think we had been discussing knitting patterns or something, which, of course led to an in-depth dissection of *D. speciosum*. We each nominated our top five clones. Out of ten possibilities, we came up with seven clonal names. It turned out that three of the seven originated from within half a kilometre of each other on my old family farm in Kangaroo Valley. The beauty of it all is that these three clones are still represented in the wild by big healthy clumps - they have not all been ripped out!

Before you start planning trips down that way, I should mention that, just like anywhere else, the vast majority are only very average, garden variety 'Rock Lilies'.

One reason I am against making the varieties of *D. speciosum* into species in their own right is quite simple. If you cross a *D. speciosum*, var. *grandiflorum*, with *D. speciosum*, var. *pedunculatum*, or *D. speciosum* var. *capricornicum*, or whatever, you would effectively be making hybrids, not species siblings. Varietal crosses such as these are currently in flask. By the time these flower who knows what we'll be calling them? Whatever they end up, there are more than a few growers about the place who are looking back at *D. speciosum*, and deciding that siblings are the way to go. In the past, the great length of time between flasking and flowering turned many away. But in the never-ending search for the better hybrid, the enlightened growers and hybridisers now realise that improving the species is the best possible course to embark upon.

Ed. - This article was published first in The Orchidophile, in December-January, 1992, and is reprinted here in the interests of the wider readership of The Orchadian.

*Printed in The Orcadian Volume 10, Number 8, p271-274
Reprinted with permission of the author and editor of The Orcadian.*