

Buying *Sarcochilus*

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Sarco. Magic '#12'

There are several choices to be made when buying any orchids. Generally it is recommended that you buy mature (already flowered) plants only if you are a rank beginner, if the plant is in flower and you like what you see or if you are purchasing a division or clone of a plant that you know to be superior. Purchasing seedlings not only provides the opportunity to enjoy the excitement of seeing a plant flower for the first time but could enable you to own a future show champion for a modest financial outlay providing that you have the patience to grow the plants until they reach maturity.

If you decide to purchase seedlings then you still have a few questions to answer

- What size - tubes, community pots or flasks?
- Which cross to choose?
- Which individual plants to pick out of the batch?
- Where to buy them?

The following thoughts may be of some consideration in answering these questions.

What Size To Buy?

Most orchids are available from nurseries as 50 mm tubestock at relatively low cost per plant. These plants are usually somewhere between a few months and one year old. Some individuals will flower in these tubes at less than one year old depending on parentage (*Sarco. spathulatus*, *Sarco. Falcatus* and *Plectorhiza tridentata* are able to produce precocious hybrids with small plants) but most will take another 2 to 4 years before they will flower. The advantage of going for tubes is the relatively low cost per plant, seedlings should be from recent crosses and the nurseryman will have got the babies off to a good start.

Occasionally nurseries will have community pots (compots) available. These are typically a 100mm pot with several seedlings from the same cross growing together. These plants are usually cheaper per plant than tubes but may be smaller (not so attractive to the impatient!) and there may be weaker individuals among the more vigorous ones. Compots have the advantages of being deflasked by the nursery and the larger number of seedlings gives a wider selection of flowers further down the track.

Flasks are the cheapest per plant option but the deflasking process can be anything but 'basic'. In your early years deflasking is best left to those more experienced although eventually everyone should try at least one flask. As most commercial flasks have upwards of 20 seedlings there is an often expressed opinion that "I don't want a whole lot of plants that will all be the same". I find this statement to be very ill-informed and likely to irritate me.

Occasionally 'advanced' seedlings which are usually described as near flowering size are offered for sale. While there is nothing inherently wrong with these plants they would be most attractive to those with little patience but one should consider why they did not sell as tubes and whether they represent the latest breeding trends.

Which Crosses To Choose?

This is largely a matter of personal preference based on the desired flower colour, shape and size of the anticipated outcome. Nursery catalogues usually provide a fairly optimistic speculation as to the likely results from a cross or at least an outline of the virtues of the parents.

Regardless of one's level of experience these prognostications are at best educated guesses as it is impossible to be certain what the result of a cross will be. The best you can do is to increase the

'educated' element and decrease the 'guess' part, after more than 20 years of breeding Sarco.s. I have some idea of what traits some parents are likely to produce in their offspring but for the rest I have very little idea. Sarco. hybridising is still very much in its developmental stage many plants considered good enough to be put to stud this year are already superseded by next season and so there is often no accumulated record of parental performance on which to base decisions. The best advice I can offer is to study the species, especially hartmannii, fitzgeraldii, falcatus, weinthalii, hirticalcar and ceciliae and learn what attributes they are likely to contribute to their offspring.

As growers gain in experience they may find a little research into the parents and then forming their own prediction for a cross to be a rewarding exercise. Regardless of experience or expertise the choice of seedlings will always be a game of chance with the inevitable highs and lows. How you manipulate the odds in this game is up to you - perhaps you have a greater chance of getting that 'special one' by getting a lot of seedlings from one cross or are the odds better when you buy a few seedlings from several crosses?

The tricky part for the novice is that you often have to make decisions rather quickly. When plants are listed in a nursery catalogue there may be some time for research and contemplation but if you come across some seedlings for sale at an orchid event then competition with other potential purchasers may expedite your decision. It is best to have done your research previously and have some idea of what you are looking for.

Sarcochilus are, in my experience, extremely infertile. Some never seem to produce seed, others may occasionally produce seed while others may produce seeds in very small numbers. This means that it is often not possible to buy seedlings from a particular parent so there may need to be a compromise in favour of a similar type of parent as the best you can do. One of my most successful plants is Duno Nicky's Twin 'Voo Doo' and obviously is a plant that is very desirable as a parent yet it is extremely reluctant to be a mother or father. For well over 10 seasons I have pollinated some of its flowers and used every grain of pollen on other flowers to achieve only 1 seed pod with only small numbers of seeds. So far every one of the resulting seedlings has been outstanding - 4 awarded as first flowering seedlings and the cross, Sarco. Magic being recognised with an ASR - well worth the effort. I and many others would like to see more crosses using Voo Doo to produce more offspring but don't hold your breath! This is mentioned to illustrate the persistence needed when hybridising and why there is often a relative scarcity of quality Sarco. seedlings available. In short, with Sarcos. it is more a case of what you can get rather than what you would like to get.

Selecting Plants

When you buy plants by mail order you are making the nursery staff your agents to choose for you. Generally they will select the largest plants from those available hence the rush to place an order when a new catalogue is issued. This arrangement seems to keep most people happy but occasionally customers complain about the small size of seedlings they receive in the post, these nurseries soon learn through complaints or diminishing patronage.

If you are shopping personally at a nursery or orchid event you get to pick out the plants that you buy ...but which ones???

I wish that I knew the answer. You may care to consider the following in regard to this situation, they are different criteria that growers have stated as their reasons for choosing particular plants.

- Pick the largest (less chance of fatality, flower quicker)
- Pick the smallest (plants with heavier cell tissue, and therefore better flowers, grow more slowly)
- Pick seedlings that exhibit colour staining on leaves/roots/stems (an indicator of being able to produce pigment)
- Pick the ones with the thickest roots or leaves (a combination of the first two reasons)
- Pick ones that have a growth habit resembling the most desirable of its two parents (the flower might too)
- Pick plants with rounded leaf tips (in the hope that flower segments will have rounded tips too)

If you are buying several plants from one cross you could perhaps buy plants that exhibit different characteristics.

Regardless of the above always choose healthy plants that have established root systems (firm in the tubes) and have a new leaf appearing at their apex to indicate that they are in active growth. Avoid plants without name tags, spotty leaves, loose, weedy or bug eaten plants at all cost.

Where To Buy Sarcos

There are a few Australian orchid nurseries that regularly carry Sarcos in their stock. You can locate them through the internet or through their ads in the orchid magazines. It is common for these nurseries to buy in their seedling flasks or seed pods from hobbyists like myself largely because of the previously stated fertility issues that prevent them getting a reliable supply of seeds.

Neville Roper, 2010