

## Variety in Today's Cattleyas



The great variety in the cattleya alliance has always added greatly to their appeal to orchid growers around the world. For the sake of this article when I use the word cattleyas I mean all plants in the cattleya complex. When I first started growing orchids the main exhibition cattleyas you regularly saw were the large ten to twenty centimetre size. They were truly the "Queen of Orchids" and a large worldwide flower industry was founded around them. The other form of cattleya seen was what was loosely termed the cluster cattleya usually with several smaller flowers a top a tall stem. For a long time this was the norm for exhibition cattleyas.

Towards the end of the 1970's an upsurge in new plant species material became more readily available to the hybridiser and a whole new vogue of cattleya appreciation took place. The laelia species were used in hybridising, as were the sophronitis to produce smaller often intensely coloured flowers on very small or compact plants. Broughtonias were crossed with cattleyas to make many of the very attractive intergeneric small flowering cattleyas we see today.

It is interesting to consider why the growers have moved away from the larger cattleya alliance plants and miniature and medium compact cattleyas are now greatly in vogue. I feel there are several reasons for this, some of which are practical others aesthetic. Increasingly our world is "getting smaller!" We do have less space available to us to keep those large plants. Large cattleyas take up a lot of bench space, require good light on their leaves and a degree of care when flowering to have the flowers presented for judging at their best. Smaller cattleyas usually require little additional care, take up much less bench space and are often hung above other orchids.



The larger cattleyas, like the standard paphiopedilum, phalaenopsis, and cymbidium have been developed for over a hundred and fifty years and have reached a high degree of perfection when compared to our judging standards. (To some the challenge has been met!) Orchid growers like a challenge so they have taken on the small cattleyas, novelty paphiopedilums, novelty phalaenopsis and miniature cymbidiums to attempt to bring them to a comparable standard of perfection. This is today's challenge.



Another reason for this shift is the greater availability of species to hybridise with at the grower's disposal. This adds interest, curiosity and a growing challenge. We all like to be extended and these new offerings do just that. When species are being used by us for the first time in breeding it takes us back to how it must have been when those first cattleya hybrids were made by men like James Dominy (*C x Hybridia*) and John Lindley (*C x Hardyana*) etc. When they flowered for the first time it must have been so exciting. Similar to the feeling we get when we flower these "new types" for the first time.

I feel another reason orchid growers follow a trend is competition and acceptance. We like to have good flowers to compare with what others growers have. If small cattleyas are the current trend it is a self fulfilling philosophy that more people will want them to compete and be seen / accepted as one of the "in touch" modern day growers. This is evident around the world today. For evidence of this look at the RHS registrations of orchid hybrids. What do you see? The vast majority of cattleya alliance, paphiopedilum, phalaenopsis, and cymbidium hybrids are small, miniature, and novelty types. By being part of the group that grow these we not only feel we are up with the current trend in Australia but also able to be seen as world players. Because of this great popularity they are what nurseries offer in their catalogues. after all they need to be with the trend to survive.

This all begs the question, what is the future of the large exhibition forms of the cattleya alliance and for that matter other genera? The answer is unsure, but if I had to surmise I would say they all have a future in the tapestry of the orchid world. Trends do come and go with the passing of time. The pendulum may well swing back towards a growing popularity for the larger flowered cattleyas. We will just have to wait and see.



Gary Hart, 2007