SUTHERLAND SHIRE ORCHID SOCIETY

When Red becomes Yellow

Sarco. Amber 'Yellow'

Over recent years there has been increased interest in yellow Sarcochilus hybrids. This interest is probably the result of some exciting breakthroughs in producing yellow hybrids along with the fact the desire for full reds has been largely satisfied. It has recently dawned on me that the source of yellow in my new pure yellow 'breakthrough' hybrids is a little more complicated than originally thought. Recently I have been asking myself the question "are some of the yellow seedlings that have flowered over recent seasons really RED?"

Sarcochilus hartmannii 'Red Snow' was, to my recollection, the first Numinbah type (ie. Red centred as opposed to the Blue Knob type) hartmannii to be granted a quality award. It was, and still is, a lovely flower with its carmine centre and pristine white outer segments. I was fortunate to be given a couple of Red Snow flowers by Kevin Wilson (the only other holder of this clone at the time being Ken Russell) to use for breeding. Wanting to build upon its obvious strengths I used the pollen on my two best red centred hybrids namely a S. Cherie (to make Cherie Snow) and a S. Cherie Snow (to make S. Snowhart). Another gift of pollen in the following season enabled me apply Red Snow to S. Fitzhart and to S. hartmannii 'Vacy', my best at the time and the result of Ken Russel's combination of Red Snow with Blue Knob #1. Surprisingly all crosses produced some albinistic clones. The S. Snowhart and Cherie Snow crosses produced a large percentage of these 'poached egg' style flowers while the S. Heidi and hartmannii produced only an odd yellow centred clone. The desired outcome of large shapely white hybrids with intense red centres did not eventuate and, interestingly, the only clones from the S. Cherie Snow and S. Snowhart considered worthy of keeping were yellow centred.

Over the next few seasons a number of S. hartmannii crosses were made looking to improve the flower size and shape while maintaining the Numinbah style red centres. This pursuit often involved the pairing of clones that had Red Snow somewhere in both oftheir backgrounds. In all crosses a small percentage displayed albinism, having yellow centres, and a total absence of red colouring. It became evident that the more infusions of Red Snow embedded in the parents the greater the likelihood of producing yellow centred seedlings. I am convinced that Red Snow is the source of the yellow centred (albinistic) genes that have been expressed to varying degrees in subsequent generations.

Sarco. Kunama 'Eureka'

Sarco. Orange Glow x Burgundy on Ice

As interest in yellow centred sarco.s grew I found more people requesting seedlings that would have flowers that looked like 'poached eggs' and to this end I crossed S. Snowhart '#2' with S. Cherie Snow 'Yellow Centre', both being albinos. The resulting seedlings displayed varying amounts, but generally more than their parents, of yellow colouration. They resembled scrambled eggs more closely than poached eggs. This grex which I have registered as S. Roberta has gone a long way to convince me that that this line of breeding has produced a series of albino clones having flowers where the usual red markings have been replaced by yellow. In effect they are the result of red becoming yellow. As I write it dawns on me that an albino clone from another cross, S. Molly (S. Dove X Jeanne) provides another piece of the puzzle in that it colour bleeds into the tip flowers, just like S. fitzgeraldii, but with yellow instead of red.

A bit convoluted? Isn't it the case that yellow is yellow regardless?..... Well Maybe but there is another line of yellow breeding that complicates the issue. This line derives its yellow genes from species such as hirticalcar, spathulatus, weinthallii, maybe olivaceous and Rhinerrhizza divitiflora. These hybrids such as S. Velvet, S Topaz and S. First Light typically produce flowers with both yellow and red colouration and are therefore not albinos unlike those discussed previously. Perhaps these could be regarded as 'true' yellows while the albino types are, somehow, imposters.

Where to from here? To further test my theory I have several crosses underway that have an albino type yellow mated to a 'true' type yellow. My guess is that these will produce an array of colours from full red to yellow and I would be surprised if any turned out to be albinos. What I am hoping is that the best of the yellows that do eventuate will become foundation parents for a dynasty of true yellow Sarco.s. If this occurs the task of turning red into yellow will have indeed been accomplished.

Sarco. hartmanii 'Lemon Meringue'
(Red Snow x Orange Eye)

Neville Roper
August 2009