

# AUSTRALIAN ORCHID FOUNDATION

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Essay Competition 2014 2nd Prize Winner

## MY FFO

By Jan Robinson

Most orchid enthusiasts have a favourite plant; but how many people have a FFO - Favourite Fluked Orchid? By "fluke," I don't mean part of a whale's tale. I mean something that has happened by pure chance or by some phenomenal stroke of good luck. Let me explain how my plant acquired this "fluked" reputation over the years.

In early 2007, when I was very much an orchid newbie, I heard that some of my fellow orchid club members were buying great plants on the internet and decided to give it a go. Having Googled "orchid nurseries", I chose one that had a nice on-line catalogue with lots of pretty pictures and randomly selected six near-flowering size plants. Once the nursery had confirmed that the plants were in stock, I transferred some money into their bank account and shortly thereafter my plants arrived bare rooted. They looked to be in quite good condition, so I happily repotted the plants and scattered them randomly throughout my new and practically empty bush house while patting myself on the back for increasing my oncidium alliance collection by over 300% in one simple transaction.

Several weeks later I attended the monthly novice growers class that my local orchid society sponsored. Lo and behold, the topic for the evening was buying orchids on the internet and I was pleased with myself for having obtained some recent experience on this very subject prior to the class - until our instructor warned us about buying mislabelled plants and gave as an example one particular on-line orchid nursery who was renowned for mailing out plants that were not true to what had been ordered. Wouldn't you know it; this was the very nursery from which I had recently bought my six orchids! Of course our instructor was right, as was proven over the next several years as my plants flowered. **Fluke #1:** only one of the six plants was what I had actually ordered, and this plant subsequently became my FFO.

The following February I was thrilled when my FFO had two gorgeous flowers and even more so in March 2009 when my plant had doubled in size and also in blooming, as it had four drop-dead beautiful purple flowers. When my plant finished flowering, I potted it up into a hanging basket and hung it in an empty corner. This was definitely **Fluke #2:** to have hung my plant there without any knowledge of what conditions might be best for its genera. As it happened, this spot was one of the sunniest parts of my north-facing bush house, and my FFO absolutely loved it.

In February 2010, my FFO had 15 stunning flowers - and the next year, 26!! The plant had grown as exponentially as the flower count, and I had an inkling that I had stumbled onto a really good orchid. However, many of the 26 flowers had tiny little marks on them which marred their beauty. When I took my plant to my local orchid society that February, I asked our President (who has been growing orchids since he was about 5, and 50 years later just happens to be quite knowledgeable about all things orchidaceous) what could have made these marks on my flowers. He told me it looked to him like insect bites. I didn't believe him, even though the hanging basket had a coir lining which was perfect for hosting little critters. I thought it was more likely that I had damaged the buds during my weekly regime of fertilizing enthusiastically with my 5 litre hand sprayer. However, on the off chance that Mr. President was correct, the following summer I sprayed my plant and its basket monthly with insecticide as soon as the buds began to form. This was definitely **Fluke #3**, as it is not like me to heed someone's advice with which I don't agree.

Just to be doubly safe that no insect got the chance to have a midnight snack compliments of my plant, every evening **WITHOUT FAIL**, from about mid December 2011 to early February 2012, I

carefully took my FFO out of the bush house and put it in our spare bedroom. This was no small feat, as by then my plant was of considerable size and weight. Moving it out of its spot in the far corner of my bush house, into the house, around several corners, and down the hall to its nocturnal resting place and then back out again the following morning took a lot of manoeuvring and special care not to break off any of the flower spikes. (My husband was not overly impressed to have this plant brought into the house every evening and then back out again every morning, either!) **Fluke #4** was that in this twice-daily migration between bush house and bedroom for almost two months, not one flower spike was damaged, not one vertebra in my back was dislodged, and there were no orchid-related domestics between myself and my husband.

In February 2012, all my TLC paid off as the **FIFTY-TWO** flowers on my FFO opened in pristine condition. I was so excited and couldn't wait to take my plant to my society's monthly meeting to show it off! By then I had enrolled in an orchid judging course and was learning about quality awards. In my enthusiasm for my FFO, I emailed all the AOC judges who are members of my local society to tell them I was bringing my wonderful plant to the meeting and would they please consider it for an award. When I got to the meeting, I was told in no uncertain terms that my request was an absolute NO NO, as judges are not supposed to know who the owner of the plant is when they are considering it for an award, as this might influence their decision. Properly chastised, I was feeling quite embarrassed and disappointed until I was told to bring my plant to another society's meeting in two days' time at which it might be considered for an award. This was **Fluke #5**: how often does your plant flower right after a meeting or show or two weeks before, so that it is not at its best for public viewing?! I had truly hit the jackpot by being able to take my FFO to another meeting while it was still looking fabulous, even if this did mean getting my huge plant in and out of the car a few more times and, of course, in and out of the spare bedroom.

Two nights later my FFO safely made it to the other meeting. Have you ever tried to keep your identity unknown as you "sneak" a huge plant into a meeting and onto the proper spot on the show bench? I did my best and then retreated into a far corner to see what would happen. It was quite nerve wracking to watch a dozen or more judges with their little bits of paper hovering around my plant and studying it from various angles. When the Assistant Registrar got his camera and special piece of black velvet out and moved my plant to a spot to photograph it, I breathed a sigh of relief. My FFO had apparently won an award! When I was told that not only had the plant been awarded an AM but also a cultural award (ACC), I was absolutely over the moon and my feet didn't touch the ground for quite some time later.



When I finally made it back down to Earth, I knew I had to break up my fantastic plant after it finished flowering. My FFO was too big to carry around anymore and it definitely needed new potting mix. I had learned so much about growing this genera and had received so much enjoyment out of my FFO over the past five years, it was time to share the love around a bit. With much fear and trepidation, major surgery was performed on my FFO as I cut it up into numerous pieces. Of course I kept the biggest pieces for myself, but I made sure that some of the other pieces went to the really good growers in my area to ensure that my FFO, <sup>1</sup>*Miltonia spectabilis* var. *moreliana* 'Big Ben' AM-ACC/AOC 2012, would live on for a very long time!

<sup>1</sup> *Miltonia spectabilis* var. *moreliana* 'Big Ben' AM-ACC/AOC 2012  
©Garrie Bromley



<sup>1</sup>*Miltonia spectabilis* var. *moreliana* 'Big Ben' AM-ACC/AOC 2012 ©Garrie Bromley

<sup>1</sup>The correct name for this species is *Miltonia moreliana* (syn. *Miltonia spectabilis* var. *moreliana*).