

My Favourite Orchid

By Myra Chalmers

My favourite orchid is *Brassovola digbyana*^[1]. The reason I really love this orchid is partly because it is very beautiful and fragrant, and partly because of all the memories it holds for me. I had been in Australia for a few years and had settled in Gladesville. It took quite a while to get accustomed to this fascinating new country. Together with my husband Ron and three children, we had emigrated from the UK and had left nearly everything dear to us behind. This was a huge undertaking and I found that most of the things I enjoyed doing were not available here. I was happy and enjoyed living in the Sydney area. I had very nice neighbours but, sadly one of them who was a TPI pensioner died. His distraught wife asked if Ron knew anything about orchids. I told her that I didn't think so but I would ask him. We had a large property in the UK and were self-sufficient. We grew our own fruit and vegies - even grafted different types of apples on to the apple trees. We had large flower gardens, plus some hens for eggs and bees for honey.

Ron duly called in next door. There were quite a few pots of orchids and they were extremely pot bound due to the illness of their late owner. I learnt later they were species cymbidiums and *Paphiopedilum insigne*. After they were broken up and re-potted, my neighbour was delighted, but now she had far too many plants and so, to thank Ron for all his work, she gave him half of the newly potted orchids. I suppose we were now orchid growers.

Ron, being a university person, had many books and among them were books on botany, including some on orchids. These he perused to learn all he could about these exotic plants we now owned. A few weeks later he attended a conference in Brisbane. I stayed at home with the children. When he returned home he could not stop talking about the fantastic orchid show he had been to see. He had not believed his eyes as the flowers were so beautiful, He was hooked. He wanted to see more. Ron also told me that there was an orchid show being held at Five Dock that weekend and he wanted to take me along to see it. It was there (I think) that we learnt there had been a World Orchid Conference in Sydney^[2]. We had not heard about it until it was too late to go and see it. There had been an open day and conference at the University and we could not have gone anyway. We had missed going to the WOC by that much.

I walked into the Five Dock show and immediately fell in love with the most beautiful orchid flower that I had ever seen, not that I had seen many. This one was different. First of all it was, by my standards, a large flower with five long thin shiny petals (I had a lot to learn. It actually had two petals, three sepals and a lip. I found that out later). They were a delicate green in colour merging into creamy white in the centre of the flower. I had never come across a green flower that was remotely like the one I saw. It had the most unusual petal in the front and it had a long sort of shaggy fringe all around it. It was also of the palest green and creamy white (I learned later it was called the lip). The other visitors to the show were waxing poetically about other plants, but not me. That plant drew me like a magnet. I called Ron over and told him



that if there was one for sale I would very much like to buy it. He told me the plant I was looking at was actually on the sales table and that there was no reason why I could not buy it right away. Silly me. I had been so engrossed by its beauty, to say nothing of the delicate perfume, and I had not noticed that it was not one of the exhibits. I was not leaving that exhibition without it. I could not wait to pay for it and really claim it as mine.

I carried it home. I nursed it all the way in the car. Once home this wonderful plant sat on my dining room table where I could sit and admire it and woe betide them if any of the children touched it. There was no way I was going to put it outside. Eventually the flower died and sadly the plant joined the others in the garden where Ron had built a small greenhouse. My orchid had pride of place there. The orchid "disease" had well and truly hit us and we started to collect other plants. Not really knowing what we were doing, we learnt very quickly not to buy mature plants that were not in flower. Obviously some people sold their plants at auctions that were not up to their own high standard. That became evident when some of these "dogs" eventually flowered.

We moved house a few years later with the help of a fellow orchid grower to whom we would be forever grateful. We now had a very large collection of many different genera. The *Brassavola* I had bought was still my favourite and it thrived in its new environment. By now we had a hot house, a cool house and two bush houses - we lived and breathed orchids.

The years went by very quickly and in 1975 we spent a year overseas in Britain and Europe on sabbatical leave. The weather in Australia was not kind that year and the orchids were neglected. The neighbour who was looking after the plants did not water them when it rained and it rained a lot. Sadly many of the plants in the hot and cool houses did not survive. My precious orchid suffered the same fate as many of the other orchids. It looked quite sick and in spite of a lot of tender loving care, it too died. I was devastated. It was enough to make me give up as my pride and joy was gone forever. However, I didn't give up, but it took years to find another *Brassavola digbyana*. It was an old-fashioned orchid and the trend at that time was to buy bigger and better hybrid plants in the *Cattleya* alliance, with rounder and more filled in flowers. Also at this time, species plants were considered to be not worth growing as they did not have flowers of commercial value. We later installed an automatic watering system, which we should have done years before to make sure something like this could not happen again.

All of our orchids were beautiful in their own way. We grew everything: Phalaenopsis, Paphiopediliums, Vandas, many species orchids. You name it, we grew it. However, nothing thrilled me as much as my precious *digbyana*. I searched everywhere for another one. Eventually I managed to buy not one, but two small skinny plants of this beautiful orchid at a society auction. I was so happy now that I possessed two of them. I could not wait for them to flower. I fed them, watered them, however try as I could, I was not able to flower them. What is even sadder is that I did not have a photograph of the first orchid I ever bought.

Brassavola digbyana likes to have plenty of light and so I hung them high up in the house. They just dangled there and did nothing. No matter what I did they were not happy. They just did not thrive. The plants around them bloomed well. Why didn't they? I think they were off cuts from a plant that had never ever bloomed. Eventually they were consigned to the bin. I am still looking for another one.

I suppose I will have to go to Central America, probably Belize, or the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico or one of those exotic places where this beautiful orchid originated, but I fear that quarantine would make it difficult or too expensive for me to bring one back to Australia. So if you see me at an orchid show in the Sydney area hovering around an orchid display that has a *Brassavola digbyana* in it. Please check if it is still there after I leave. You know where I live.

[1] The current correct name for this species is *Rhyncholaelia digbyana* (syn. *Brassavola digbyana*)

[2] 6th World Orchid Conference was held in Sydney 1969

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