

SHEFFIELD & DISTRICT ORCHID SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 2011



**JANUARY PLANT OF THE MONTH
*CYRTOCHILUM FRACTUM***

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EDITORIAL

Thankfully the worst of winter seems to be in recess, and I've been able to get things back to normal, and do a few bits around the greenhouse and outside. February sees the start of the repotting season for me, and there will be some changes and more experiments. I tend to use bark for some plants, coconut chips for others, loam for cold terrestrials, and moss for the others. Varying degrees of additives such as perlite, limestone chips etc., get used as required. I've always used a bark mix for the Cattleyas, but I did one plant in a bark/coconut mix last year, and it really did well – doubling the bulb size. I think that the kiln dried bark isn't keeping sufficient water. Adding some chopped moss has helped improve the situation, but I've decided that I will put all the 'cats' into the Botanicoir mix (see lecture below), and I'm expecting some good results. Alongside this I will test this out on other plants alongside their existing potting media.

BUSINESS

The latest Golden Guides are now available for members to take home. Show fliers for Chatsworth are also available – please take some and distribute...

On a sad note, we have heard of the sudden death of Joyce Stewart, who was one of the most senior authorities in the world. She has spoken to us on a number of occasions and will be sadly missed.

There is a possibility of a trip to Writhlington School in 2012. There is a choice of dates in either May or November. A show of hands indicated a positive response, and this will be further investigated.

The Devon Orchid Society is holding a weekend symposium at Dawlish on 14-16th October – in memory of Brian Rittershausen. We aren't putting on a display, but there is a reasonable hotel package available for attendees.

Members are requested to please enter plants for judging on the table show. The minimum ownership period is 6 months.

Tea & coffee is now 30p per cup.

THE TABLE SHOW

This month's talk was given by John Garner who had quite a full table to go at. First up was a specimen sized *Cattleya percivalliana* with 4 spikes of medium sized flowers. It is quite a variable species, but this one was a pleasant pale pink. At the opposite end of the scale was the almost miniature *C. Love Hero* with a small yellow flower with a red lip. *C. Binotii* is a tall slender plant with flowers that are mainly pale green with a flamboyant purple spotted white lip. *L. gouldiana* is a plant with a long spike of a few decent pink flowers (see back page)

Onc. Twinkle was a large pot full of growths and short spikes of tiny deep pink flowers. A similar plant is *Onc. ornithorhynchum*, not quite as big a plant, with pale pink flowers. *Odm. cristatellum* is a smallish growing species with spiky flowers of yellow and brown – very attractive. *Onc. ampliata* (syn. *Chelyorchis ampliata*) is relatively small compared to some of the others, and has a short spike of yellow flowers. *Cyrtochilum fractum* had 3 spikes of tiny purple & white flowers. This was adjudged to be the plant of the month (see front cover). *Wils. Tiger Brew* was the final *Odont.*, and is an easy grower with delightful red/yellow flowers. Several good clones have been meristemmed by the million. In the slippers, *Paph. Maudiae* was a decent example of a green/white flower. *Carmen Coll 'Satin'* was a decent white with pink overlay of a modest size. *Autumn Snow* was an old fashioned white shape with some fine spotting. Via

Luna Este 'China Doll' was quite colourful, mainly purple with a flat dorsal. Sunblazed 'Chilton' had a large cupped flower of brushed gold. Woodland Glade had 2 flowers of yellow with nice spots. *gratrixianum* was a small plant grown from flask by the owner, and was still a small plant that will get better in future years. *braemii* is a small 'enthusiasts' species with a generally pale green flower with some brown spots. A well grown plant of Phrag. *Ainsworthii* (syn. *Calurum*) had a single flower of a pale colour. *Longifolium* var. *gracile* was a large plant with a single spike and 1 good flower. Will Chantry was a thinly grown plant with good deep orange flowers – more aligned to its *besseae* parent. *Neofinetia falcata* isn't a flower usually seen at this time of the year as it usually flowers in the height of summer. Cv. 'Kibana' is a rarity within the species in that it is yellow rather than the common white, so is highly regarded by the Japanese. *Angraecum Crestwood* is a lovely plant, a rare hybrid in this group (*veitchii* x *sesquipidale*), still fairly young, and with 2 perfect flowers of pure white. The flowers don't last for too long, so we were lucky to see this plant at the optimum point. Phal. *Rousserole* was a pleasant speckled white, and an unnamed yellow *Cymbidium* was now just about on its last legs. *Pleione Wharfedale* was the last plant, a very nice pink.

JANUARY PLANT OF THE MONTH

CYRTOCHILUM *FRACTUM*

Cyrtochilums (or is it *Cyrtochila*) differ from other *Oncidiinae* by having a lip which is somewhat triangular and smaller than other segments of the flower. *Cyr. fractum* grows naturally in Ecuador and Peru in the Andes at between 6000 – 7500 feet, winding it's slender inflorescences up through tree branches for support.

One of my two 12 X 8 greenhouses is dedicated to about 200 *Odontoglossum* related plants along with a few *Cymbidiums* and *Pleurothallids*. These plants thrive on fresh cool air so my biggest problem is keeping them cool. Between end March and end September there is no heating, the door and windows remain open with aluminium weave shading externally. The door has a screen to prevent the local pheasant gang from entering and causing havoc. During winter I maintain 8 – 10 °C with the house closed except on days when the outside temperature is 10°C or above when I open up to allow fresh air. A Hotbox Mistraal fan circulates 900 cubic meters of air hourly all year. Plants grow in a mix of bark, moss, and perlite in varying proportions according to need. Every morning I spray everything, drenching in summer, and as I use clay pots they absorb this moisture to help maintain humidity and keep the roots cool. Under bench sprays

operate several times a day in summer so humidity rarely drops lower than 50% but is usually between 65% - 85%. In summer plants are watered individually every 4 days (10 days in winter) with rain water. I use a variety of fertilizers because I believe varying the nutrients is beneficial. I alternate between Akearn's rain mix, Orchid Focus, Maxicrop seaweed extract, and various Chempak formulae. Plants in this group like to go to bed wet, so during my 6 week absence last summer they seemed to relish my timed overhead drenching sprays. **Richard Baxter**

THE USE OF COIR FOR COMPOST

RAY CREEK

Ray is now probably the last local (to Sheffield) grower left, and has been to talk to us several times before. Composts have long been of considerable importance to growers and anything that reports better growth is usually trialled and then either adopted or discarded. Ray has tied himself to a relatively new compost, and this lecture was an unashamed sales pitch for the product.

Often composts for orchids come as a spin off from other horticultural products where there is serious funding available for increased productivity. The Dutch have now been using coir/coconut either alone or in a mix for the last 10-12 years. Better plants seem to be produced over other growing media. Issues with peat have helped to refine and improve the medium. Coconut husk is a waste product from the coconut industry, and the husk is about the same volume as the coconut itself, so there is a huge amount created, and generally left to rot on tropical beaches. Its first use was as bedding for horses where straw wasn't preferred. Animal bedding is a huge industry in itself, and there are plenty of horses in the Netherlands. Once used, it was likely to have been used as mulch, and is now widely available in garden centres for this purpose as well as play areas. After some trials, the better husks were used in horticulture, where eventually they became available to the orchid industry.

Ray first came across husk at a trade fair on the continent. The vendors were looking to sell by the wagonload – which is a tad too much for a trial. He was able to get a bale to try out which came back to the UK. The husk had been washed, and in theory was ready for use. This was tested for

salts, and appeared clear, so a trial was carried out with lettuce seeds – which are a good benchmark for compost trials. They germinated and grew OK, so some orchids were tried out. This was successful, and so in due course a pallet was purchased, and sold to the public as well as being used in the nursery. The general public seemed to like it, and came back for more. Another pallet full was purchased, and all looked rosy. It seems to work well on most plant groups, although some plant groups haven't yet been tested.

Unfortunately the suppliers went out of business, so an alternate supplier was sought. Sadly the product was of a poorer constitution – probably having been left on the beach for years prior to use, rather than fresh from the coconut mills. Customer dissatisfaction soon grew and Ray's reputation went down just as quickly. It just shows that you can't always trust your suppliers, and that there can be variation in the product.

His belief in the product remained intact, and a decent source was required. At another trade fair, he came across a new supplier called Botanicoir. This is a family run business with their roots in Sri Lanka, and sales in the UK. Their main UK sales area is in cucumbers and carnations, both of which are fussy growers, so the product has to be perfect to avoid hefty lawsuits. The husk is sourced directly from the mill in Sri Lanka, so isn't dumped anywhere to pickup salts, pests or other contaminants. The husk is chipped, and put into huge vats of soft water for 2 days, followed by rinsing, then 2 more washings. The PH is checked to be between 5.4 and 6.8. If it isn't then it is either washed again or discarded. The main purpose of this is to wash out the tannins. When clean and relatively dry it gets a further soaking in a balanced fertiliser. The final treatment is to super heat the husk to kill any bugs. Once processed it is dried and compressed, packed into small bales and exported on a slow boat to Europe.

Husk is very absorbent and more than doubles in size when wet. Alternative growing media like bark can only absorb a small amount, so husk acts much more like a buffer – both for water and for fertiliser. The first time that fertiliser gets used on husk it would all simply be absorbed and not used on the roots – hence the preloading.

Lignin is present in the husk, which is a natural fungicide. This slows down rot (by fungus) and decomposition. Unlike bark and moss that rots and goes sour within a couple of years, husk will remain in good condition

for at least 4 years – thus generally halving the amount of repotting required each year.

Other benefits are that being absorbent both air and water are refreshed and made available. The odd shaped pieces keep the air around the roots rather than eventually becoming a sodden mass. The nutrient buffering tends to avoid root burn. The EC is .7ms.

The husk needs wetting well prior to use otherwise the swelling will kill the plant and burst the pots. 1 days soaking should suffice followed by a good draining. Don't overpot, and firm lightly. Watering may need to be modified as with any other changes to conditions, and can generally be at further intervals. No crocking is needed as the relatively coarse material will cover the holes in the pot, and nothing will turn to dust. Generally the husk should be used on its own. Unlike bark or moss, nothing else is required to keep the mix open such as perlite or sponge rock.

Several Society members have already tried husk successfully, and some others were tempted to obtain a small amount for trial purposes. We wish them all success.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY...

MONTHLY MEETINGS AT RANMOOR – 10AM

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| Feb 13th | Ted Croot – an introduction to Paphiopedilums |
| Mar 13th | Andy Phillips - Phragmipediums |

OTHER SHOWS

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| Feb 27th | Harrogate OS annual show. Britannia Hotel
Bramhope. SDOS exhibiting. |
| Mar 19-20th | RHS London orchid Show. |

Society website - www.sheffieldorchids.org



Above: - *Angraecum Crestwood*.

Below: - *Laelia gouldiana*

