

# Orchids

By Sally J Clarke

Orchids are the most captivatingly diverse and delightful of all flowers. There are thought to be some 25,000 species, and potentially thousands still unknown. Rebecca Tyson Northern wrote in *Home Orchid Growing*, "So different are they one from another that at first glance it is hard to believe they are related. It is as if nature, having invented the basic orchid theme has, like a talented musician, played every conceivable variation". Some are spectacular such as the *Cattleya*, which come in many sizes and a fantastic range of colours. Others are almost microscopic like the 'necklace orchids' whose minute flowers are produced in dainty chains - yet they all come from the plant family known as the *Orchidaceae*.



*Cattleyas in Gardens by the Bay, photo by Andra Leo*

In the late 1700s and 1800s, many expeditions were sent from Europe to explore the tropics. As a result, Europeans discovered a cornucopia of orchids. Within a short space of time orchids had become tremendously fashionable and were highly prized by wealthy individuals who funded expeditions to bring them home from across the world. The orchids' provenance varied dramatically. Some were found by waterfalls and streams, while others thrived in sunlit spots or could be spied growing in treetops or on the ground.

In Asia, the admiration of orchids, in particular by the Chinese and Japanese, stretches much further back than the European collectors. In China, the philosopher Confucius compared the virtuous man to an orchid. Echoing this thought, Chinese artists sometimes placed orchids in their work to evoke the Confucian qualities of humility, integrity, refinement – in fact, all the virtues of a perfectly cultured gentleman and scholar. At a recent Christie's auction in New York, some stunning examples of orchid works by Japanese artists were shown; these dated back many centuries. One of the most important works was by Teshu Tokusai (d. 1366), a noted *bunjinsō* (monk-literatus), who specialised in paintings of orchids as well as geese.

Given the importance of orchid symbolism, it is not surprising that seven countries have selected the orchid as their national flower: Venezuela – *Cattleya Mossiae*; Singapore – *Vanda Miss Joaquim*; Colombia – *Cattleya Trianae*; Costa Rica – *Cattleya skinneri*; Belize – the Black Orchid or *Encyclia Cochleatum*; the Republic of Honduras – *Brassavola Digbiana*; Panama – *Flor del Espiritu Santo* – *Cattleya mossiae*.

The *Vanda Miss Joaquim* is unique because it is a hybrid, the first registered plant hybrid in Singapore and the only



*Vanda Miss Joaquim, photo courtesy of the National Parks Board*

hybrid national flower. It was bred by Agnes Joaquim, an experienced horticulturist who was born into an Armenian family in Singapore on 7 April 1854. The second eldest child in a family of ten, not only did she produce the first *Vanda* hybrid, but it appears she was the first woman in the world to breed a hybrid orchid.

Dr Nigel Taylor, Director, Singapore Botanic Gardens asserts "This orchid, a hybrid between *Vanda teres* and *Vanda hookeriana*, is hardy and free flowering. It was described in 1893 by the first director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Mr H.N. Ridley, who named it after Agnes Joaquim. Its unique feature is that unlike the majority of orchids, it belongs to an unusual group of climbing species that lacks the pseudo-bulbs of the majority".



*Tiger orchids along Holland Road, photo courtesy of the National Parks Board*

One of the joys of living in Singapore can be ascribed to the opportunity to see many spectacular orchids at the Botanic Gardens and also Gardens by the Bay. Personally, I like to discover them in their natural habitats where they shatter the common verdant sidewalk colour palette like unique pieces of contemporary street art.

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