

Burma's Orchids

In November 2007, the Rainbow and the Hirsute Paphiopedilum Orchids were reported as extinct in Burma. But, there is good news.

By Alan Surrey

They arguably captivate the human imagination more than any other plant species on the planet. Orchids! With exotic names like the Butterfly, Sharry Baby, Dancing Lady, Oncidium Twinkles, Ghost and Slipper Orchid, they are available in a stunning range of colours with fragrances that are unrivalled in nature.

The exquisite flower is ranked the second most popular potted plant in the United States and could soon replace the Poinsettia as number one. The 2008 Taiwan International Orchid Show ended recently after attracting over 200,000 visitors during its 10-day run where sales were expected to reach US\$64.69 million. Orchids have been celebrated in Hollywood. Charlie Kaufman's screenplay 'Adaptation.' brought to the screen one man's obsession with the mysterious, wildly diverse plant.

The Royal Botanical Gardens of Kew list 880 genera and nearly 22,000 accepted species. Because of taxonomic disputes, the exact number is unknown and could be as high as 25,000. The number of orchid species equals four times the number of mammal species and twice the number of bird species. A majority of orchids are perennial epiphytes, which grow anchored to trees or shrubs in the tropics. Other species are lithophytes. They are terrestrial and grow on rocks or other normally inhospitable *terra firma*. Of the 22,000 known species, 841 grow in Burma. (Myanmar).

They are found in the northern, snow covered mountain regions of Kachin State to the central tropical jungles along the Thai-Burmese border. *Cymbidium longifolium*, is a stunning white flower hued with red which grows at a height of 7650 ft. It clings

precariously to the moss-covered branches of laurel, birch and maple trees. Many cold-climate orchids rely on self-pollination due to the absence of pollinating insects. No such problem exists in the north and central, tropical border regions where the orchid flourishes.

Demand for the wild orchid is at an all time high and Dan Sing Khong is typical of market towns dotted along the Thai-Burmese border where every Saturday morning Burmese traders cross through the border post to sell the latest bounty picked from Burma's pristine tropical habitat.

On the Saturday I visited, they had been setting up stall since before first light. Some buyers had eagerly traveled the 300 kilometers south from Bangkok, others had traveled the short distance from coastal resorts nearby. Mercedes Benz, Pick-up trucks and luxury Toyota 4x4's were parked haphazardly along the single dusty road that leads to the border post. The atmosphere was festive, charged with a sense of expectation. By 9am, the stalls were crowded with buyers eager for a bargain – or a rare find. On display, hundreds of wild orchids, some changing hands for as little as 100 baht. (US\$3.00)

One buyer, Daeng has collected 17 different species of orchid. He is typical of those mesmerized by the plants mystical allure. "They have a spirit which seduces you" he said with a smile. Eade, a pharmacist who works at a local hospital also has an impressive collection of orchids purchased at Dan Sing Khong. "I can't explain why I like them. Addiction. If I have the money, I buy."

The cross-border traffic in wild orchids is not without controversy. Like any natural resource it is open to commercial abuse threatening the existence of some species or drastically depleting the numbers of others. The glorious Rainbow Orchid and the

Hirsute Paphiopedilum, first discovered in the valleys of Putao and Nagmung in northern Kachin State 20 years ago are now, as of November 2007, extinct in Burma.

On the demand side, China is one key factor in the equation. Chinese traders pay up to 100,000 kyat (\$91) for a viss (1.6 kilograms) of wild orchids. Burmese orchids in particular are highly sought after. Wild orchids prized for their medicinal properties are sold for up to \$4,000 a ton on the Chinese market. There are more than 20 wild orchids that are used in traditional Chinese herbal remedies.

Some like the Pierard's Dendrobium (*Dendrobium pierardii*), the musky smelling Dendrobium (*Dendrobiummoschatum*), and the peculiarly named, Hairy Column Foot Dendrobium (*Dendrobium capillipes*) are used to relieve human ailments such as liver disease, poor eyesight or as essential ingredients in multi-vitamins.

On the supply side, consider Burma, one of the poorest countries in the world with a GDP per capita income of US\$1900 and what is apparent, is a complex socio-economic scenario bereft of easy answers.

Despite the reported loss in Burma of the Rainbow and Hirsute, approximately 800 new orchid species are discovered each year according to the Royal Botanical Gardens of Kew. Crucially, it is commercial cultivation that is the prime source which feeds the growing global appetite for the wondrous flower.

Taiwan, the "Kingdom of the Butterfly Orchid" is the world's largest exporting country supplying nearly half the world's butterfly orchid varieties. Taiwan exported NT\$1.84 billion worth of orchids in 2006. Thailand is the second largest exporter of orchids.

Floriculture is emerging as a major growth sector in India which is a natural habitat of cymbidiums and dendrobiums, the most sought-after orchid species.

And the orchid is nothing if not adept at adaptation. A terrestrial orchid species thought to be extinct in Tasmania has recently been rediscovered. *Corunastylis nudiscapa* known as the Dwarf Midge Orchid has been located on the slopes of Mt Wellington near Hobart by officers of the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment (DPIWE). This species has not been recorded since the type was collected in 1840.

Though the trade in wild orchids in border towns like Dan Sing Khong flourish in a grey area - not sanctioned or condoned by authorities - they do offer an opportunity to purchase the species grown naturally in the wild and will no doubt continue as long as there is sufficient demand. Whether self-regulation is enough to prevent any further damage to the various species remains to be seen. One buyer from Bangkok said pointedly "We buy the orchid to keep as a flower, not destroy and turn into medicine."

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