

A Report from the 2009 Cymbidium Congress Panel Discussion

By HEIDI KIRKPATRICK

I was delighted to be able to attend the 2009 Cymbidium Congress, an event held in conjunction with one of the jewels of the United States cymbidium season, the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show. The company was delightful, the food delectable, and the auction...well let's just say I spent rather more than I intended.

The speakers, of course, are the main attraction of this day-long event. I heard about Australia, China, the Eric Young Orchid Foundation, and the Orchid Zone, plus a beautiful tour of China at the Banquet. Some of our distinguished lecturers will be featured in the *Journal* during the coming year.

But aside from the lectures, one of my favorite events is the panel discussion, held at the end of the lectures. The panel for the 2009 Cymbidium Congress included not only Congress speakers—Kevin Hipkins of Royale Orchids in Australia, John Valin from the Eric Young Orchid Foundation, Dr. Holger Perner from the Huanglong Nature Reserve in Sichuan Province, China—but also a surprise guest from Holland, the noted cymbidium expert Ben Singer. Several regional experts completed the panel: Dr. Ken Bruland from Santa Cruz, California; Loren Batchman of Casa de las Orquideas in Solana Beach, California; and CSA judging chair Dr. Ken Jacobsen from San Carlos, California.

With a distinguished and international panel, it was appropriate that they were asked to address differences they perceived in cymbidium growing around the world.

Ben Singer began with the observation that the pot plant markets in Japan, Holland and the US are quite similar, catering to a similar buying public. However, he estimated that 10% to 15% of growers in Holland will stop making cymbidiums in the next few years. Even those who are doing well with pot plant production do no breeding. It is cheaper to fly around the world in search of new stock than to maintain breeding stock in Holland. He added that this is the same throughout Europe, with only the Eric Young Orchid Foundation breeding good cymbidiums.

The colors on display at the Santa Barbara Show received mention from several panel members. John Valin found them to be quite different from what he commonly saw at shows in the United Kingdom. He was struck particularly by the spots and stripes, and by the rich plums. He noted that seeing cymbidiums from another region can be inspirational, and he was indeed inspired to try new things at EYOF.

Cymbidium enthusiasm in China is dominated by *Cymbidium goeringii* and its many forms. Dr. Holger Perner commented that Western style hybrids and other species are not unknown, but are instead viewed as “decor” and planted in the ground or in pots adorning buildings. However, he sees that that cymbidium hybrids common in Japan are now beginning to trickle into China.

Kevin Hipkins relayed that there is no cut flower market in Australia. Everything



Photo courtesy Don Brown

Panelists at the 2009 Cymbidium Congress in Santa Barbara, California. From left to right: Kevin Hipkins of Royale Orchids in Australia; John Valin of the Eric Young Orchid Foundation on the Isle of Jersey; Dr. Holger Perner of the Huanglong Nature Reserve in Sichuan Province, China; CSA Judging Chair Dr. Ken Jacobsen of San Jose, California; Loren Batchman of Casa de Las Orquideas in Solana Beach, California; Dr. Ken Bruland of Santa Cruz; Ben Singer of Holland.

is sold as potted plants. This results in a different sort of plant being favored by commercial growers.

Cut flower plants must be very productive, with a certain minimum number of stems per square meter of production space. They also have to be consistent, and here Kevin Hipkins observed that the Dutch are the best in the world with cut flowers.

The general discussion of cut flower requirements also revealed that cut flowers must be intermediate in size. Large flowers don't fit in the standard packaging. This has driven US cut flower producers, such as Gallup and Stribling, to seek uniform flowers and spikes of a size to fit in the boxes, rather than the increasingly large flowers that were popular a decade or two ago. Additionally, the flowers must last well when cut.

Though cymbidiums in Australia are all sold as potted plants, Kevin Hipkins did differentiate between the showbench plant of the EYOF type and a pot plant sold with four to five stems per pot. John Valin observed that the RHS is considering a garden plant award for potted plants.

Loren Batchman noted that his market consists primarily of amateurs growing outdoors in California. This type of breeding withstands outdoor weather

conditions, but is very different from the "hostess plant" marketed in Japan or Holland. A good hostess plant has a maximum of flowers in a minimum amount of space and is something that might be presented as a gift.

Panelists also were asked which species they would like to see gaining prominence in the orchid world. Kevin Hipkins was quick to answer that his favorite is *Cym. erythraeum*, a species that was featured in his Congress presentation. The species has been under-utilized by hybridizers.

Dr. Holger Perner noted that members of section *Jensoa* are not rare in China, but could not speculate on how much interest there would be in these species outside of Asia. Personally, however, he is intrigued by potential breeding with the relatively newly described *Cym. wenshanense*. At first glance, it is a little like *Cym. erythrostylum*, but early experiments suggest it breeds very differently. Panel moderator Norito Hasegawa noted that the introduction of Chinese species into current breeding lines might also change the flowering season.

Ken Jacobsen commented that there are numerous intriguing forms and varieties of *Cym. goeringii* in Asia, but what reaches the US and likely other parts of the world is rather limited. Furthermore, information about cultivation is not readily available.

Only some 15% to 20% of cymbidium species appear in hybridizing. Some of the rest, according to Ben Singer, are gone from cultivation. They are found once, then never again.

The audience asked the hybridizers on the panel to delineate what *Cym. Mighty Mouse* brings to a cross, given that it is rarely awarded. Loren Batchman responded that *Cym. Mighty Mouse* has open starry flowers that are closely set on the spike. For a hybridizer, these are minuses, but they are offset by the tremendous color range and interesting colors that appear in the progeny. *Cym. Mighty Mouse* itself has a red overlay with a base of yellow and green, each of which can be inherited separately, resulting in pinks without green or yellow, greens without reds, plus browns, and yellows to deep oranges. Additionally, the hybrids are amongst the fastest growers. Even growing outdoors, they will flower four years from flask.

Kevin Hipkins added that the plant would be deserving of a breeder's award. His remakes of *Cym. Marie Bashir*, a *Cym. Mighty Mouse* child, always sell out; they are immensely popular in Australia. He noted that technically the spikes are arching, but how one stakes or grows has a great deal of influence.

Culture is always paramount on the cymbidium grower's mind, and this was apparent as the panel was asked about encouraging root growth and whether calcium in the mix aids spike production. Ken Bruland observed that calcium or magnesium have been used traditionally for spiking, and some growers apply large quantities of epsom salts for this purpose. He believes a little may be helpful, but not a large amount. There have been no controlled studies on how to encourage spiking, which leaves growers with only anecdotal evidence.

Ben Singer emphasized that not only is there a dearth of scientific research in orchids on this subject, but what little has been done is long out of date. Additionally,

each grower has individual tricks and potting mix. He noted that when he began growing in Europe, beech tree leaves were used as a component of potting mixes. Today, it is coconut fiber.

Kevin Hipkins likes applying monopotassium phosphate in February in Australia. Ken Bruland added that some like calcium nitrate and epsom salts. But Dr. Holger Perner cautioned that there is no proof that phosphorus does anything.

John Valin observed that night temperatures are paramount for bloom production. Dr. Holger Perner agreed, noting that the nicest flowers come from cold night temperatures. In addition, it is good to feed the plant well so it is strong enough to bloom.

Some plants, however, are by nature reluctant bloomers. Loren Batchman has observed particular plants that spike in alternate years. However, others can be tricked into blooming twice in a season if he can get growth in August.

Finally, on the question of the importance of water purity, *Cym. devonianum* and its hybrids are notorious for detesting dissolved salts and minerals. Poor water quality will show up as brown leaf tips on these plants.



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