

The Oriental Cymbidium Challenge

Text and Photos by DON BROWN

A number of cymbidium lovers that I know report how impressed they were by the Oriental cymbidiums on display at the Japan Grand Prix International Orchid Festival. I was expecting a similar experience on my first attendance at that show in 2007. What I did not anticipate was the sheer volume of space given to the display and sales of what the Japanese refer to as *toyoran*, orchids that are native to East Asia and that have been collected and cultivated in those regions for a great many generations. In the case of the Oriental cymbidiums, especially *Cymbidium goeringii*, cultivation goes back close to two millenia in China. *Cym. goeringii* appears



An orange-colored form of *Cymbidium goeringii*, shown at the Japan Grand Prix.



Cymbidium goeringii 'Soubei' from the author's collection.

to be the most prized and widely cultivated species among the Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese.

Cymbidium goeringii, a symbol of spring in countless paintings, is appreciated for its graceful foliage and sweet perfume. Its relatives in the *Jensoa* subgenus of cymbidiums are collected and appreciated too, but in Japan less so. Among them are *Cym. ensifolium* (very widely cultivated in China), *Cym. faberi*, *Cym. kanran*, *Cym. sinense* and *Cym. tortisepalum*. As with *Cym. goeringii* these species have relatively wide distributions.

Given the wide geographic spread of the subgenus *Jensoa* and the very



Cymbidium goeringii 'Daiki', a floriferous example of the species, shown at the 2008 Japan Grand Prix.



Cymbidium goeringii flowers from the author's collection.

long history of its cultivation, there is considerable uncertainty or dispute concerning the identification of species and varieties. There are varieties of the species listed above that have been or are treated as distinct species and there is considerable synonymy. Phillip Cribb has recently commented on these issues in his review of *The Genus Cymbidium in China* (Orchids, July 2007, p. 546-547). The subject also appears in the recent revision



Cymbidium goeringii 'Good Girl' flowering in the author's collection.

of *The Genus Cymbidium* by David Du Puy and Phillip Cribb.

However, my main concern here is more on culture, particularly the potential for outdoor growing, breeding, and display of the Oriental cymbidiums in Southern California or locations with similar climates. The principal difficulty is not so much in the growing as it is in blooming. Some clones of *Cym. ensifolium* are among the easier to bloom, and two very successful hybrids have been made with it: *Cym. Golden Elf* and *Cym. Peter Pan*, both of which have gone on to be useful breeders. In each of these cases the other parent was a complex cymbidium. I find *Cym. sinense* more difficult to bloom but some of its hybrids, again crossed with complex cymbidiums, are well-known successes.

Here in the U.S. there is not much of a track record—at least not a commercially successful one—of line breeding with *Cym. ensifolium* or any of the others in the *Jensoa* subgenus. The same can be said of primary crosses wholly within that family.

It should also be noted that most varieties of *Cym. goeringii* produce very few flowers per inflorescence, which in the Western orchid world is a negative feature. For this reason alone *Cym. goeringii* would attract little attention among commercial hybridizers.

To my knowledge no really attractive



Cymbidium faberi, flower, from the author's collection.

clone of *Cym. goeringii* is known to be a reliable bloomer in Southern California. To some extent this is because many of the really attractive clones—"reds", yellows, greens with black lips, etc.—are themselves virtually unknown in the U.S. and may even be relatively newly discovered in Asia. But the principal problem seems to be cultural: either *Cym. goeringii* needs a cooling spell in winter or it needs greater heat and humidity in the summer, or maybe both. For the outdoor grower in Southern California these conditions may be difficult to provide.

But if one agrees that *Cym. goeringii* has an enchanting charm, in spite of its lower flower count, and would like to grow and bloom it outdoors in Southern California, what is to be done? The answer is selection and breeding.

One starting point would be to find clones that, for whatever reason, will bloom regularly in Southern California. With such clones as a starting point, line breeding could produce more variety and enhance the quality of the progeny, as is done with line breeding in any other species. Primary hybridization among the easy breeding clones but within the *Jensoa* subgenus could capture the charm of the *toyoran* cymbidiums while giving yet further variety of form, color, and shapes.

Another starting point is to hybridize



Cymbidium faberi shown at the 2008 Japan Grand Prix.



Cymbidium tortisepalum var. *longibracteatum*
from the author's collection.

the Oriental cymbidiums with those cymbidiums that will bloom easily in Southern California to thereby capture in the resulting offspring some seedlings with both ease of blooming in that location and an appearance resembling the Oriental species. This has already been started, and with pleasant, commercially available



Cymbidium (sinense x Oriental Elf) 'Ichiyou'
shown at the 2008 Japan Grand Prix.



Cymbidium lianpan, a Chinese form, blooming
in the author's collection.

results, but rarely, apparently, with the aim of getting something that has the petite foliage, upright spikes, and low flower count of *Cym. goeringii*. However, if the offspring of these crosses are then back-crossed and re-backcrossed onto the target species, say *Cym. goeringii* again, in time one would end up with clones that had both retained the charm of the species while capturing the temperature tolerance required in Southern California and similar climates.

Both possibilities are being pursued. I have a clone of *Cym. lianpan* that has bloomed very reliably for me for a decade. *Cym. lianpan* is a species or variety of uncertain taxonomic status. Some Asian authorities consider it a variety of *Cym. tortisepalum*. My clone has lengthy, stiff, slightly serrated foliage. I have pollinated it with a more standard-looking *Cym. goeringii*, in the hope of retaining its ease of blooming but with more petite and graceful foliage.

In recent years the Japanese firm of Mukoyama Orchids has hybridized *Cym. goeringii* and *Cym. lianpan* with standard cymbidiums. Many of the seedlings (and now meristems) capture some of the floral charm of these species, but most that I have seen had fairly robust foliage that does not capture the overall charm of *Cym. goeringii* or *Cym. lianpan*. A clone of *Cym. Eastern Venus* (*goeringii* x *Sleeping Beauty*) that was exhibited in New Zealand a couple years ago had lovely flowers, notably fuller than the species. The plant overall was larger, too. Back-crossing this clone or others like it onto the species should result in what is needed: the charm of *Cym. goeringii* and the temperature tolerance of a standard cymbidium.

Some hybrids that have come close to being *Cym. goeringii* lookalikes have been meristemmed by Mukoyama Orchids. These include *Cym. Eastern Bunny* 'Taketorimonogatari' (a cross of *goeringii* with *Lovely Bunny*). When George Hatfield of Hatfield Orchids displayed two plants of the 'Taketorimonogatari' clone in bloom

at the Fall Show of the Orchid Society of Santa Barbara in 2006, the judges quickly snapped up all that he had for sale. I managed to get the two display plants and promptly put pollen from other Oriental cymbidiums on them. Jason Fischer of Orchids Limited has also initiated breeding with that meristem.

As I mentioned above the most prized and widely cultivated Oriental cymbidiums for the most part have few flowers, attractive as they are, and *Cym. goeringii* usually—but not always—keeps its flowers well below the top of the foliage. Some of the Japanese growers compensate for this by letting the spikes develop in opaque tubes, so that the spikes elongate in search of sunlight. Even a single flower, held well, can make a charming sight.

In addition to getting the spikes elongated and sometimes carefully and unobtrusively staked, the Asians add to this charm by further careful attention to display. Most importantly, the cymbidiums are often displayed in decorated ceramic pots that are considerably taller than wide and that flare outward at the top. Usually the pots have legs. Instead of the lush profusion of plants and flowers in Western-style displays, the displays of *toyoran* are usually more restrained and elegant, in the manner of “less is more.” Fewer orchids and flowers are used, but in harmony with a setting that may consist of lacquered driftwood, *shoji* screens, artfully carved and positioned bamboo, and the like. The displays seem to a Western eye to be more like a restful zen garden than what is mostly seen in displays here in the United States.

In my opinion, this attention to display features, most notably the pots, will prove to be an important part in any popularity that these cymbidiums can achieve in such a cymbidium heartland as Southern California. At the Japan Grand Prix, there are many exhibits devoted entirely to the *toyoran* or to a single genus from among them. A particularly spectacular



Cymbidium Eastern Bunny 'Taketorimonogatari' blooming in the author's collection.



Cymbidium Eastern Bunny 'Oborozuki' from the author's collection.

display was entered by Professor Yasushi Hirano, PhD, who is President of the Japan Oriental Cymbidium Society and author of magnificently illustrated books (in Japanese) on *Cym. goeringii*. The central feature of his display was a translucent white screen, behind which was an Oriental cymbidium, behind which a fan and light source were situated to project the image of the cymbidium on the screen, so that it looked like a black and white sketch or

painting of a cymbidium—but a cymbidium in gentle motion.

A drawback of the traditional, tall pots is that they are easily tipped. To compensate, many growers place rods across their benches with the rods elevated and so spaced that they catch the flared upper lip of the pots, keeping them suspended rather than standing on their legs.

The more attractive ceramic pots tend to be pricey, so I am using plastic pots for growing. These pots are more readily available, too. For purposes of display, it would be desirable to have ceramic pots that are the right shape but of a size that readily allows a plastic pot to be popped into them at show time.

For the most part, I have grown these cymbidiums too briefly to offer much in the way of cultural advice. If one can read Chinese, Japanese, or Korean there are numerous how-to books and internet web pages. I do not know the extent



An orange form of *Cymbidium goeringii* displayed in a tall, decorative pot at the 2008 Japan Grand Prix.

to which they would be applicable to Southern California growing. One of the papers annotated at the end of this article is written from a Southern California setting.

Let me close by reiterating my main point: we can achieve a distinctively American—well, at least Southern Californian—form of the cultivation of Oriental cymbidiums if we take two important steps. One is to find clones that will happily grow outdoors in this region (and others similar to it—the Mediterranean climate zones of the world). The other is to breed temperature tolerance into lines of breeding that emphasize but are not confined to the Oriental cymbidiums. To encourage taking these steps a number of friends and I plan to sponsor a trophy for the “Best Oriental Cymbidium” at the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show beginning in 2009.

A Note on Terminology

In the popular literature on orchids the cymbidiums of the *Jensoa* subgenus are commonly referred to as “Chinese” orchids. While geographically not an accurate label it does recognize the Chinese priority in



Cymbidium lianpan 'Sinsinsoin' displayed in a tall, decorative pot at the 2008 Japan Grand Prix.



Partial view of a display by Professor Yasushi Hirano, PhD, at the Japan Grand Prix.

Fung, Teresa Kaiwai, 2002, "Cymbidium ensifolium," *Proceedings of the 16th World Orchid Conference*, pp. 314-319.

Liu Zhong-jian, Chen Sing-chi, Ru Zheng-zhong, and Chen Li-jun, 2006, *The Genus Cymbidium in China*. The sections on taxonomy are both in Chinese and English while the other sections, including culture, are in Chinese only. This book is particularly useful for its presentation of a Chinese view of what are species and what are varieties within the *Jensoa* subgenus.

cultivating these cymbidiums. But they are no less prized in Korea and Japan and they are native to those regions, too. "Oriental" also occurs in the literature, and is the term that Professor Hirano, for example, uses. Some people have suggested "Asian" or "temperate" (because they come from temperate-climate areas), but neither term has much of a history in designating these orchids. *Jensoa* is the least commonly used and in these days of rapidly-changing taxonomy runs the risk of losing its present meaning. Since "Oriental" has esthetic as much as geographic connotations, I have opted for it. Du Puy and Cribb, in their very recently published update of *The Genus Cymbidium*, also use the term "Oriental" in relation to the *Jensoa* subgenus.

Annotated References

Cribb, Phillip, 2007, "Review: *The Genus Cymbidium in China*," *Orchids*, vol. 76, no. 7, pp. 546-547.

Du Puy, David and Phillip Cribb, 2007, *The Genus Cymbidium*, Kew Publishing.

Paek, Kee-Yoep

and Hosakatte Niranjana Murthy, 2002, "Temperate Chinese *Cymbidium* Species," *Orchid Biology: Reviews and Perspectives*, VIII, Tiu Kull and Joseph Arditti, eds., Kluwer Academic Publisher, pp. 235-286. This work's extensive and fully annotated discussion contains valuable information for breeding with these cymbidiums.

Weckerle-Thrun, Charles, 1996, "Growing Chinese *Cymbidiums* in Southern California," *Orchid Digest*, vol. 60, no. 3, pp. 117-119. Brief but directly relevant.

*Don Brown is a retired anthropologist who found his first cymbidiums in the back yard of the house he and his wife purchased on moving to Santa Barbara in 1969. He soon became an enthusiastic hobbyist and has long focused solely on outdoor-growing orchids. In 1988 a *Dendrobium speciosum* that he had grown for 25 years earned him the American Orchid Society's Butterworth Award.*