

# Orchid of the Month for November, 2014

## *Oncidium forbesii*

by Bruce Adams



Figure 1: *Oncidium forbesii*: A small plant with big flowers

My very first orchid was an *Oncidium*, specifically, *Oncidium retermeyerianum*. I ordered it from Orchids by Hausermann in 1976. The flower was described as green, brown, and yellow. I had no idea what this was going to look like, but the color combination sounded intriguing to me, and so I ordered the plant. Unlike today, when you can connect to the Internet and look up a plant on the Internet Orchid Species Photo Encyclopedia (IOSPE) (1), back then your only choice was to go to the library and search through the few orchid books in the collection, hoping you would find a picture of the plant you desired. One of the best books at the time was *Exotica* by Graf. It contained an incredible number of photographs of orchids and other tropical plants, albeit many of them in black and white. Color printing was expensive back then!

While looking for a picture of *Oncidium retermeyerianum*, I saw so many other *Oncidium*, with their bizarrely shaped flowers, that I was hooked. I fell in love with the genus, and for a while, became somewhat of an *Oncidium* expert. I particularly liked the *Crispa* section of *Oncidium*, with its flamboyant, wide petals with ruffled brown and yellow flowers, many variously marked with spots. Species orchids were more easily obtained in those days, and I volunteered at Planting Fields Arboretum in the orchid house, so I soon acquired a few specimens of *Oncidium* from the *Crispa* group. It's been a while, but I recall growing *Oncidium gravesianum* and *Oncidium enderianum*.

I did not have a greenhouse at that time. All of my orchids spent the winter in my bedroom window, which faced south. I did not supplement the humidity, other than with a daily misting. My plants were moved outdoors in early May, where they thrived in Long Island's tropical summer weather.

These days, species orchids can be difficult to locate. Growers like Andy's Orchids, and the Santa Barbara Orchid Estate, both in California, as well as Ecuagenera in Ecuador, and Orchids del Valle in Columbia are species specialists. They all maintain a very large selection of species. Many other growers sell species, but they seem to have a limited selection. I was very happy when we had a speaker at the Sacramento Orchid Society, Francisco Miranda of Miranda Orchids (3), who brought with him a few *Oncidium forbesii* plants. These were bare root, with a few dried roots on them, but I wanted one, so I shelled out my twenty dollars and took the plant home.

Francisco suggested that I put the plant in sphagnum moss to get its roots going. This was in September, 2013, so the temperatures were still quite warm in Sacramento, with ninety degree days fairly common. Before long, I noticed new roots emerging, and soon they were outgrowing the two-inch clay pot into which I'd placed the plant. When a new growth emerged in spring of this year, 2014, I never expected it to bear a flower spike, but come September, what did I see, but a spike growing from the base of the plant! Even though I would not recommend this, I repotted the plant at this time into a four-inch pot, replacing the sphagnum with medium grade Orchata. I felt the pot was too small for the plant and it needed to go into a larger pot. Despite my cultural error, the spike grew relatively quickly. In early November, it bore four large, fabulous, intricate flowers, each about two and one half inches across.

If you go to "Phil's Orchid Site" (2), you will find a treasure trove of information about various genera, including *Oncidium*. He has articles on the individual sections in the large *Oncidium* genus (he does not separate out *Cyrtorchilum* or *Tolumnia*, as this is a somewhat old site), including one on the section *Crispa*. He states that the *Crispa* section of *Oncidium* comes from the "coastal regions of Brazil". Spring weather is warm and wet, with frequent rain and mist. Winter weather is cooler and drier, when the plant goes dormant, ceasing all growth. This explains why I was so successful growing this outdoors in the summer and indoors in the winter. The plant essentially stopped growing just at the time that I could no longer provide it with tropical, humid air.

And this is what makes plants within this group of *Oncidium* worth exploring for the grower without a greenhouse. A plant that goes more or less dormant in the winter can spend its time in a bright window, without very much humidity or water. Once growth commences, the watering can be stepped up a bit, and the plant moved outdoors, gradually increasing its exposure to brighter light. This is reminiscent of *Catasetum* culture, where the plants not only stop growing in the winter, they actually shed all of their leaves. In that state, watering is very frequently fatal for the plant. While this is not so with *Oncidium forbesii*, the plant certainly tolerates typical indoor winter conditions.

One nice aspect of *Oncidium forbesii* is that it is a relatively small plant. My plant is blooming in a four-inch pot, and it could probably last two more years before it outgrows its space. The leaves are no longer than about six inches, and the spike is about ten inches long. I suspect that future leaves and spikes may be longer, but still, this is a relatively compact plant, and good for any grower with limited space (meaning all of us).



Figure 2: *Oncidium forbesii*: Note the beautifully scalloped petal edges.

So check out the amazing *Crispa* section of *Oncidium*. You will find wonderful flowers on compact plants. This is not your Trader Joe's *Oncidium*!

#### References:

- 1) Internet Orchid Species Encyclopedia: <http://www.orchidspecies.com/>
- 2) Phil's Orchid Site:  
<http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~tomnz/oncframe/oncframe.html>
- 3) Miranda Orchids: <http://www.mirandaorchids.com/> (Note: No *Oncidium* currently offered on the web site.)

#### Sources:

- 1) Andy's Orchids: <http://www.andysorchids.com/>
- 2) Santa Barbara Orchid Estate: <http://www.sborchid.com/>
- 3) Ecuagenera: <http://www.ecuagenera.com>
- 4) Orchids del Valle: <http://www.orquivalle.com/>

*About the author: Bruce Adams has been growing orchids for 38 years, since he got his first Orchid, *Oncidium retermeyerianum* (now *Lophiaris lindenii*!) from *Orchids* by Hausermann. His plants split their time between the great outdoors and a cool greenhouse in the winter, as well as on the windowsill. He is also the author of the novel, *The Palace of Dreams*. His ideal life would consist of writing and growing orchids, while living in Hawaii with his lovely wife, Linda.*

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