

Dendrobium section Calyptrochilus – Jim Brydie

Dendrobium is a huge genus that I am afraid is destined to be broken up as more work is done, especially in the new field of plant DNA. My personal inclination is to be a 'lumper' and to leave these mega genera alone, but I realise that I am kidding myself. When the science is complete, I am sure we will all have to acknowledge the truth of the real group relationships. Anyway, for the time being at least, let's say that there are about 40 species in section Calyptrochilus. They are nearly all endemic to New Guinea but there are a few from the Solomon Islands, and one, *D. erosum*, has quite a wide distribution, including Vanuatu, and Thailand.

Some of the species in this group are quite widely cultivated, and probably the best known would be *D. lawesii*, a beautiful PNG species with several different colour forms. The various natural colours have now been artificially cross bred to produce even more colours, including some stunning bicolor forms as you can see below.



Dendrobium lawesii has pendant stems that can be more than 60cm long. The showy flowers are each only 2.5cm long, but they are produced in multiple heads of 5 or 6 that can cluster together to make an impressive display. It occurs as an epiphyte, low on trees or on the underside of branches, in mist forests between about 800-2000m. Despite these reasonably high altitudes however, I have found that at least in my conditions, many clones are warmish growers that don't appreciate our Sydney winters without artificial heat or at least some kind of protection. Another fairly readily available species is *D. subclausum*, which happens to be a cold grower from higher altitudes, (2000 -3300m). *Subclausum* also has a few colour forms, but the most common is orange with a yellow tip to the outer segments. The pure yellow form is called var. *pandanica* because it is only found on Pandanus trees.

Subclausum has a wider habitat range than *lawesii*, occurring from mountain rainforest to alpine grasslands. Its branched stems start upright but are eventually arching to semi pendant, and the plant can form a slightly tangled mass over time. The flowers may not be quite as spectacular as its cousin, but given that it is a colder grower, it surprises me that it doesn't seem to have been the focus of more man made breeding like *lawesii*. But who knows, perhaps it has, and the results haven't been promising. Anyway, I grow several forms in my polycarbonate roofed shadehouse at my Hornsby home and they seem to grow quite easily.



There haven't been many interspecies hybrids made in this group, but one that is easily obtainable is the gorgeous cross between *D. mohlianum* and *D. melinanthum* (pictured left). It was made by Phil Spence and is called Gowan's Tangello. The parents and the hybrid are very similar, other than the species *mohlianum* has a purple lip. As often happens however, hybrid vigour makes the cross easier to grow, and it is also a cold grower. Its brilliant 2.5cm flowers make it a very desirable orchid to have.

I obviously can't mention all 40 species in the section here, and most are virtually unobtainable anyway, but there are a few lovely species in this section that are listed by specialist nurseries from time to time. The three shown below are especially worth noting in your 'must look for' notebook.



D chrysopetalum
(syn. *obtusisepalum*?)

---- D *glomeratum* ----

D *pseudogglomeratum*