

## SEEDLINGS – OUR INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

By Julian Croker

What is a seedling? So often people do not appreciate the difference between a seedling and a mericlone. A seedling is a plant resulting from the growth of a single orchid seed, formed by the union of a male pollen grain with a female ovum. It is a uniquely new plant that has inherited various features from both its parents. Even when an orchid is crossed with itself (selfing), or where two plants of the same species are crossed with each other, variation is obvious in the seedlings that result.

A mericlone, on the other hand, is a plant that results from the multiplication of tissue from the meristematic area of a single plant. All resulting plants have an exactly identical makeup and, barring mutation, will all be identical. It requires a 6-9 month period from pollination to harvesting the seed, followed by a 9-12 months period in a sterile flask to produce a viable plant for the outside environment. It then takes 3-5 years to produce a flowering plant (a 5-7 year generation time in all). Growing seedlings, where there is no guarantee of a desirable result, is therefore an exercise only for the commercial grower or the genuine amateur devotee.

New cymbidiums are produced predominantly by raising seedlings. Advances may take the form of a show champion, a new shape or colour, or some other outstanding feature. The chances of achieving these ends are small, perhaps one in a hundred or a thousand. However, the constant improvement in genetic material available in the parent plants and the increasing knowledge and experience gained by hybridisers gradually improves the chances of producing exceptional seedlings.

Many avenues are now available in cymbidium breeding lines and rewards are available in all of them. For many, the show-bench orchid is appealing and probably the majority of seedlings are produced with this end in view. Seedlings with the potential to provide new shapes and colours and colour combinations are also becoming more available, as well as those with extended flowering times, perfumes, warmth tolerance and super-productivity.

All good collections should contain a number of seedlings, and it is best to add more seedlings to the collection regularly. A few should be purchased each year from the various catalogues available. Bear in mind that catalogue descriptions are based on expectations and that hybridisers are great optimists! With larger collections, even more seedlings or a few community pots, each containing ten or twenty seedlings from the same grex, may be grown.

You are never too old or too young to start growing seedlings and once a collection has become established over a period of time, there is the constant excitement of seeing new cymbidiums flower each year. You may be the lucky one!

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