



# A land of orchids

Straddling the Tropic of Cancer, Taiwan is less than a sixth the size of the UK but has an amazing range of habitats. **Simon Garbutt** investigated one of its floral specialities, orchid growing. Photography by  Simon Garbutt





New hybrid *Phalaenopsis* from SOGO Team, in a range of plant sizes and flower colour. Variegation (below) is an exciting development

Lying off the coast of China, Taiwan (or the Republic of China), is a country of extraordinary contrasts. Despite having a population of around 23 million, most of the main island is mountainous, densely forested and thinly populated. 'New' plant species are still being found there: at least 16 native species or varieties have been described since 2005.

There are believed to be a minimum of 101 orchid taxa (made up of 322 species, 3 subspecies and 5 varieties) native to this group of islands. Many are obscure, but some are well-known and commercially important. *Pleione formosana* (commemorating Taiwan's earlier name, Formosa) is one of the best-known, and there are two native moth orchids: *Phalaenopsis aphrodite* subsp. *formosana*, with white flowers,



and more colourful *P. equestris*, usually pink but more variable in colour. Sadly, Taiwan's showiest orchids are now extremely rare in the wild, despite having legal protection since July 1975.

## The orchid trade

Although the pure native *Phalaenopsis* species are seldom seen, hybrids between them and more colourful non-native species – especially bigeneric hybrids with members of the

closely-related *Doritis* genus – are the mainstay of Taiwan's thriving floricultural industry. In recent decades, amateur enthusiasts and professional growers have created thousands of showy *Phalaenopsis* and *XDoritaenopsis* cultivars with distinctive, often spectacular markings. Exports of orchids from Taiwan in 2009, mainly to the USA, Japan and Europe, were worth US\$ 86.8m (£59.7m). Moth orchid hybrids in fact accounted for well over half of all Taiwan's floral exports.

## SOGO Team

One major innovator in breeding moth orchids is SOGO (Superior Orchid Growers' Organization) Team, based in southwestern Taiwan. What started as a hobby

Continued on  next page



Orchids are one of Taiwan's most valuable exports. The latest results of breeding programmes are presented every March at the Taiwan International Orchid Show



for its chairman, Chiang-Kuei (John) Feng, has grown, in 30 years, from a single glasshouse to 63,000sqm (678,000 sqft) of glasshouses and laboratories on several sites. Now SOGO employs around 300 staff and can produce 10 million plantlets annually by mericlone culture, the micro-propagation techniques that have revolutionised orchid growing in the last few decades.

John Feng still retains all the infectious enthusiasm of the amateur for his subject. He began breeding orchids in a

simple lab in his basement in 1985, experimenting with *Cattleya* and other species. A few years later, needing a steady income, he decided to concentrate on moth orchids, which have the advantage that the grower can bring them into flower at any time of year by controlling the growing conditions.

A major breakthrough came in 2004, when his *XDoritaenopsis* Leopard Prince grex cultivar

Continued on  
next page ➔





A waterfall of orchids displays Taiwanese breeding prowess

'SOGO F-1138' (marketed in Europe as *XD. Sexy Pink*), won Grand Champion of the Show at the triennial (8th) Asia Pacific Orchid Conference. Its pale pink petals have distinct white zones freckled with dark pink dots.

Other SOGO innovations met with initial disbelief. Fellow growers laughed when, in 2001, John introduced his first dwarf *Phalaenopsis*. 'Small plants mean small profits', they scoffed, but he persevered, and his Little Lady range – and other Miniatures, yet smaller Super Miniatures and Intermediates between the two – have proved immensely popular in Europe and Australia, and increasingly so in the USA.

More on SOGO Team at: [www.sogo-orchids.com.tw/en/](http://www.sogo-orchids.com.tw/en/)

### The Taiwan International Orchid Show (TIOS)

Held annually in mid-March, TIOS

is one of the world's top orchid shows, attracting around 300,000 visitors over ten days. The 2010 show was the twelfth; the last six have been held at the Taiwan Orchid Plantation in southwest Taiwan. Set up with government, trade and academic support in 2004, the Plantation aims to become the world's premier centre of *Phalaenopsis* production, research and development.

Spectacular stands of massed orchids fill a lofty glasshouse covering 4,500sq m (48,438sq ft); another spacious hall displays a huge array of orchids submitted for judging, with a special exhibit of Taiwanese native species (some as plants, others as photographs, paintings or models). A third hall houses nurseries' sales booths.

TIOS 2011 runs from 5 to 14 March, and will be held in the

capital, Taipei, as part of the five-month-long Taipei International Flora Exposition, as well as at the Plantation.

For more on both shows, see: [www.tios.com.tw/](http://www.tios.com.tw/) and: [www.2010taipeiexpo.tw](http://www.2010taipeiexpo.tw)

Although the orchid trade has slowed recently because of the global recession and market saturation (*Phalaenopsis* hybrids are now the world's most popular houseplant), Taiwan's focus on quality and innovation will surely keep it at the forefront of orchid development for the foreseeable future, with many beautiful new plants ready for introduction.



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