

# Sense and Insensitivity —when a name offends

**JULIAN SHAW** discusses orchid names that have become offensive, and the regulations that govern changing them



*Cattleya Stalin*

WHEN IT COMES to naming plants it might seem that anything goes. Recent editions of the *International Code of Nomenclature for Cultivated Plants* (ICNCP) have been formulated with a spirit of deregulation, and seem to allow for almost anything provided it does not exceed 30 characters in length. A cultivar or grex epithet can be an invented nonsense or an unpronounceable combination of letters and numerals. So can anything be done if an epithet becomes a cause of offence?

### Can a name be overturned?

A long-standing provision of the ICNCP protects the interests of the plant's originator, that is, the hybridizer or the selector. They have an unassailable right to overturn an established name if it is not to their liking. Occasionally, this has occurred with orchid hybrids. In all innocence, someone registers a grex without any idea who the originator might be, and sometime later after publication the registrar receives representations from the breeder. Once the originator has demonstrated the genuineness of their claim, the name is withdrawn and replaced by a new epithet of the originator's choice. Such a situation is easy to administer, unless the claim to have originated a hybrid arrives from competing parties. In the one instance of this, an external arbitrator was invited to review the registrar's decision in order to ensure fair play.

There have been rare occasions when it is obvious, even to the registrar, that a suggested grex epithet is intended to insult a third party. In such cases the registrar discusses the options for alternative names with the registrant.

*Cattleya* Stalin 'Rivermont', painted by Nellie Roberts



#### PLANTS TO WHICH AWARDS HAVE BEEN MADE IN 1946

■ *Cattleya* × 'Stalin' var. 'Rivermont.' A.M. June 18, 1946. This was a cut spike of three large flowers which had been sent to England by plane. In colour rosy-mauve, the labellum ruby-crimson with a golden-yellow throat. The parents were *C.* 'Angus' and *C.* 'Gloriette.' Exhibited by Mr. Clint McDade, Chattanooga, Tennessee, U.S.A.

The hybridizer has the unassailable right to overturn an established name if it is not to their liking, but what about us?

### Offensive names

However, what if an established name is sometime later generally perceived as offensive, or perhaps an eponym loses its credibility because of notorious conduct by an individual? From a story in circulation which can be found on the websites of the General Patton Historical Society, and of some orchid nurseries, it might seem that these names can

be overturned too. In 1942, when World War Two was underway and the then USSR was allied with the West, a UK nursery, Black & Flory, named their new hybrid, *C.* Angus × *C.* Gloriette, as *Cattleya* Stalin. Sometime later, the nature of Stalin's rule became known, and it is claimed that the hybrid was re-named *Cattleya* General Patton. In fact a full-page advert in the

December 1951 *American Orchid Society Bulletin* depicting General Patton in battle dress announced that the RHS had removed the name Stalin and renamed the hybrid General Patton.

Appealing though the story might be to some, the advert (right) is just a sales promotion, and belongs with other clever advertizing fictions such as, 'An apple a day keeps the doctor away'. The truth is that both names still remain in the International Register of Orchid Hybrids: *Cattleya* Stalin (1942) and *Cattleya* General

Patton, registered in 1952 by Clint McDale of Rivermont Orchids, USA. *Cattleya* General Patton was registered as *C. Bow Bells* × *C. Barbara Billingsley*, a hybrid quite distinct from *C. Stalin*. (Though it may be amusing to note that in 1973 Kensington registered a hybrid of *C. General Patton* × *Golden Myth* as *C. General Patton Myth*.)

Back in 1952 the situation was such, that on page 18 of *The Orchid Review* of February 1952, Lord Aberconway, then RHS President, and Gurney Wilson, then Chairman of the RHS Orchid Committee,

made an announcement outlining the facts of the case and commenting that, 'the rules admit of no alteration'. Their announcement concluded with an apposite quote from Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), evidently cited here to underscore the immutability of established plant names: *'The Moving Finger writes, and, having writ, Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.'* (from *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*). But is this really the case with plant names?

*Cattleya* General Patton



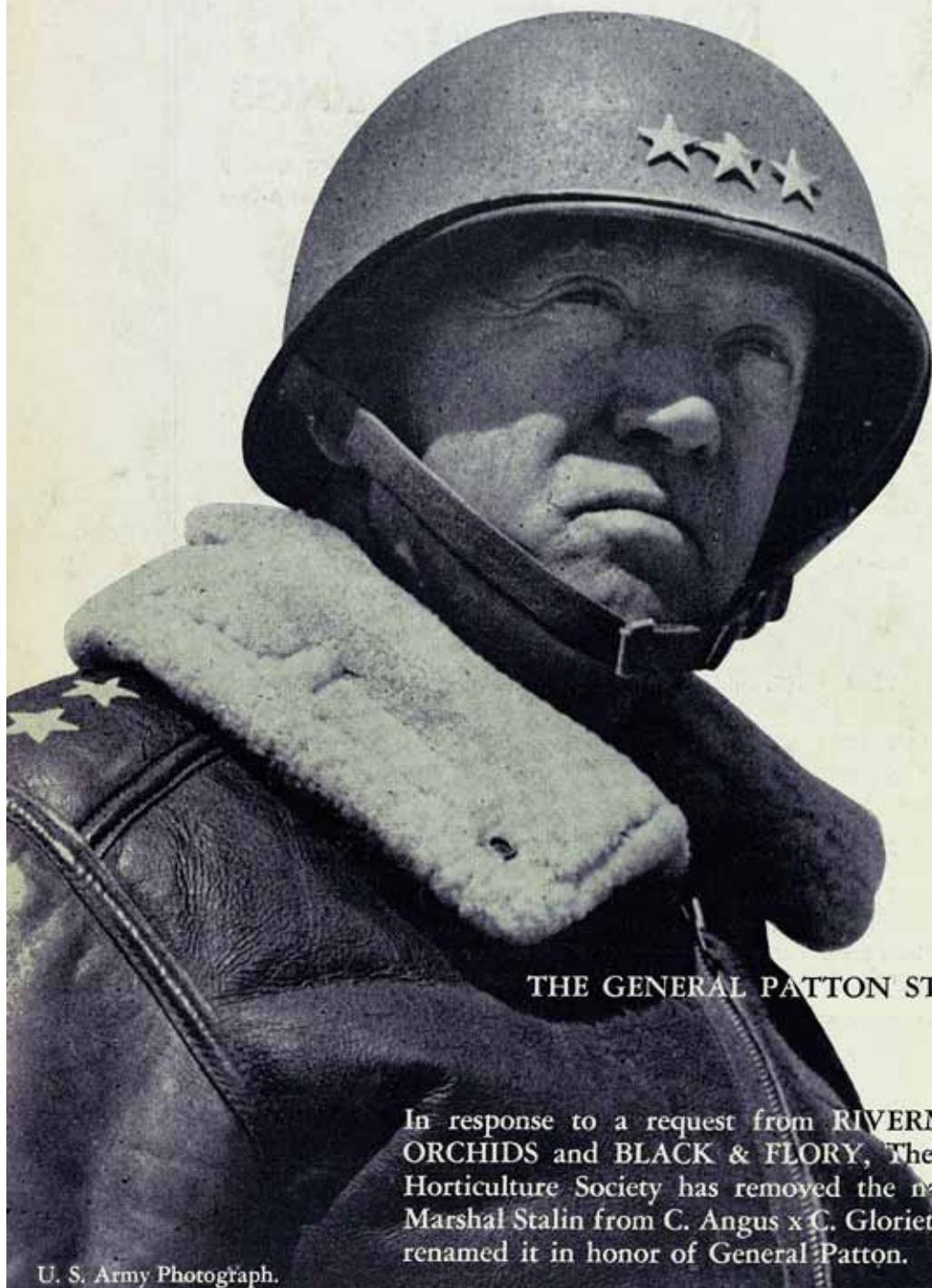
Charles M. Province



The full-page advertisement featuring General Patton that appeared in the December 1951 edition of the *American Orchid Society Bulletin*

*Rivermont*  
ORCHIDS  
SIGNAL MOUNTAIN, TENNESSEE

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## THE GENERAL PATTON STORY

In response to a request from RIVERMONT ORCHIDS and BLACK & FLORY, The Royal Horticulture Society has removed the name of Marshal Stalin from C. Angus x C. Glorietta, and renamed it in honor of General Patton.

U. S. Army Photograph.

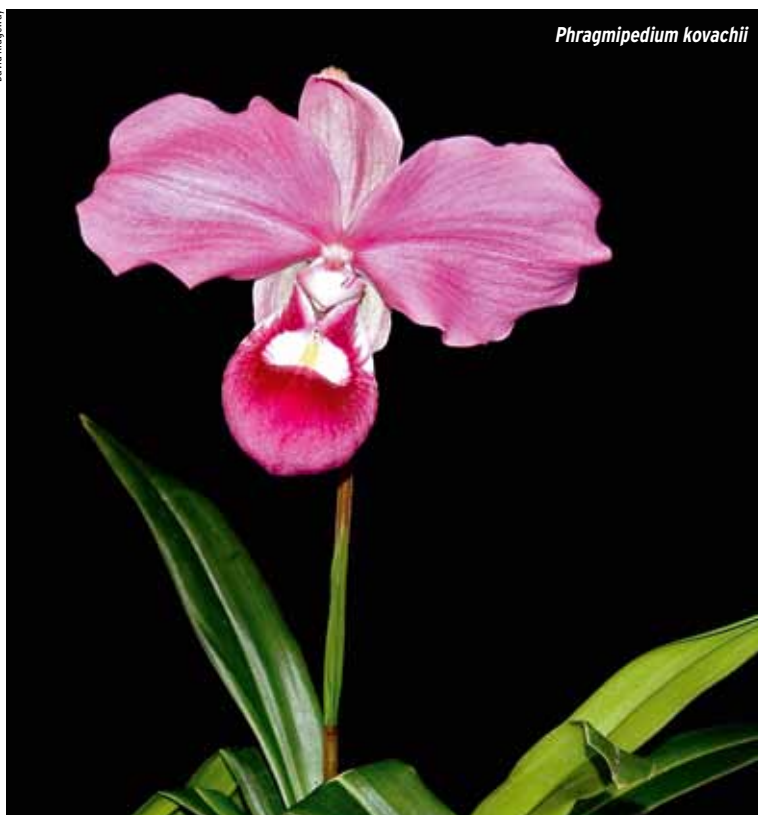
## Changing botanical names

The rules governing botanical names are slightly different to those for hybrid names. It is not currently possible to change a botanical name deemed as offensive, even when there is a legal requirement to do so. In November 2004, when passing judgement in the case considering events surrounding the naming of *Phragmipedium kovachii*, a United States court ruled that the name should be changed. This was on the grounds that Kovach had been found guilty of violating the endangered species act, CITES, by transporting the endangered orchid from Peru to the USA, and should not be able to benefit from his crime by having the plant named for him. But the internationally agreed rules by which species epithets are established, included in the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature (ICBN) do not provide a mechanism for such, perhaps unprecedented, legal intervention. So consequently the name *Phragmipedium kovachii* is still in use globally, even in the USA.

## Recent provision for changes

The 2009 edition of the ICNCP opened a door to changing hybrid names. In response to problems encountered by the Hemerocallis Registrar who encountered some sexually offensive epithets from one grower, Alan Leslie and Piers Trehane, two of the great thinkers behind the codes of plant nomenclature, successfully proposed the concept of offensive names. Article 21K.1 recommends that a cultivar (or grex) name should not be published if its epithet might cause offence. Further to this, should such an epithet be published, Article 31.8 makes the following provision, 'If it is thought that a cultivar, Group, or grex epithet might cause undue offence, an application may be made to the IUBS (International Union of

David Ridgeway



*Phragmipedium kovachii*

## Feelings ran high and officials were heckled while giving lectures at events

Biological Sciences) International Commission for the Nomenclature of Cultivated Plants to rule on whether that epithet is to be rejected.' Detailed reasons and documents must be provided along with the application.

### A contender for change?

A *Cymbidium* awarded by the American Orchid Society in 2007 provides an example where Article 31.8 could be invoked. The primary hybrid *Cymbidium canaliculatum* x *C. madidum* was registered in 1966 as *Cymbidium* Little Black Sambo. This

appears to have gone unnoticed at the time. Written in 1898, *Little Black Sambo* is a children's story by Scottish author Helen Bannerman (1862–1946), who lived much of her life in south India. It is the story of a boy named Sambo who outwitted a group of hungry tigers. The story itself has no racist overtones, and praises the child's ingenuity, but some believe that it may have contributed to the use of the word 'sambo' as a racial slur. The original illustrations by Bannerman showed a caricature of a southern Indian or Tamil boy. But over the years, the success of the book led to various pirated, cheap versions some of which incorporated stereotyped images of 'black' peoples popular at the time. The book was withdrawn from many schools and libraries for a number of years, although some felt this was undue



Cymbidium Little Black Sambo



censorship. Attitudes towards the book are still mixed. The original is widely available in book shops, libraries and schools, as are re-tellings of the story, such as Fred Marcellino's *The Story of Little Babaji* (1996), and Julius Lester's *Sam and the Tigers* (1996).

At the time when *Cymbidium* Little Black Sambo was registered, in 1966, the USA was experiencing unrest as a result of desegregation and race riots, and the registrant was a wealthy southern orchid grower. 'Taking all of this into consideration, the name was probably chosen with at least a modicum of racism', observed an American Orchid Society (AOS) official. Feelings ran high after the AOS awarded a plant of *C. Little Black Sambo* in 2007, and for some time AOS officials were heckled during lectures at orchid events. Even the RHS registrar received irate

emails demanding a change of name, one of which claimed that a letter had been sent to the UK Prime Minister's official residence, 10 Downing Street, requesting his intervention. Gradually tempers calmed and no action was taken. However, Article 31.8 remains an option in this case.

### Where to draw the line?

There are many epithets with the potential to cause offence to someone. The area is very subjective, and one person's villain, may be another's hero; perhaps that could apply to any politician. Examples range from *Paphiopedilum* Ho Chi Minh, *P. Stalingrad* and *Dendrobium* Clara Bundt 'Kimilsungia' on the political left, to *Dendrobium* Margaret Thatcher on the political right. The latter was registered by Singapore Botanic Gardens, who have named several

hundred orchids for political figures and Heads of State. Others like to name for popes and saints, equally offensive to some, e.g. Jewish or Muslim orchidists, and so it goes on...

With so much nomenclatural instability among orchid genera currently, resulting from the revisionary work of *Genera Orchidacearum*, it may seem untimely to discuss ways of changing grex epithets. But good sense needs to prevail over insensitivity, and this is a fitting opportunity to pay tribute to the nomenclaturally innovative thinking of Piers Trehane who died suddenly in March 2011. In these increasingly litigious times the successful proposal of Article 31.8 may prove to be a wise addition to the code. ■

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