



Orchids given an Award of Garden Merit

LIZ JOHNSON explains why the RHS has included tropical orchids as well as temperate orchids in the relaunched Award of Garden Merit.

She looks at the history of the award, and begins a regular series profiling the outstanding orchids that have been awarded an AGM



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THE RHS AWARD OF Garden Merit (AGM) was instituted in 1922. The idea behind it was to identify outstanding plants that could be recommended to gardeners 'for ordinary garden or greenhouse use'. But over the years this list of good performers slowly fell into disuse. In the early 1990s it was agreed by the Society that an up-to-date list of recommended plants would be of benefit to gardeners. Work began on drawing up a new list in 1992, with the help of the RHS plant committees, a trials committee and RHS staff.

Many AGM plants were selected through the trials system at RHS Garden Wisley. Plants were, and still are trialled, often over several years, in a dedicated trials field or other suitable area. This form of trialling was not appropriate for tropical or temperate orchids because Wisley had neither the space nor the staff time to evaluate the wide range of orchids grown by hobbyists. It was decided that in circumstances where orchids, or other plants, could not be trialled, that the best course of action was for the relevant RHS committee

to submit a list of suitable plants for inclusion, based on personal experience, consultation with experts, and round table discussion.

The rise of the moth orchid
Following the launch of the 1992 AGM list there was an upsurge of interest in orchids as houseplants,



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particularly *Phalaenopsis* hybrids. The market was being flooded with easy-to-grow but unnamed mericlones. Some of these tissue-cultured plants were sold for just six months, before being replaced by plants with superior flowers, or in more 'fashionable' hues or patterns. After much debate, the Orchid Committee recommended that all orchids other than hardy or alpine-house plants should be removed from the AGM list in 2002. Orchid cultivars were, and still are, arriving in supermarkets and retailers unnamed, incorrectly named or sometimes under several different unregistered names. No matter how well these orchids performed, including them in the AGM list would be impossible.

From 2010 to 2011 the RHS reviewed the effectiveness of the AGM and concluded that the concept was still valuable, and that revision in both content and presentation would give a boost to the award. Nurseries, garden centres and supermarkets would be encouraged to 'come on board', and a new, more modern logo would be designed. All RHS plant committees were encouraged to review their lists and remove plants

that were no longer available or had been superseded by better performers.

The AGM criteria wording was updated. So to be considered for inclusion in the new AGM list plants had to be deemed to consistently be:

• Excellent for ordinary use in appropriate conditions:

A cultivar or selection that outperforms others, perhaps for more flowers, length of flowering, scent, colour, form or in other significant ways

• Available: To buy

• Of good constitution: The plant should be known to be generally healthy

• Essentially stable in form and colour:

The plant should perform according to its description

• Reasonably resistant to pests and diseases:

The plant should have no pest or disease issues that would affect growth and performance

The definition of appropriate conditions included both the garden, and a cold, or heated domestic greenhouse.

Orchid Committee set to work

It was with some trepidation that the current Orchid Committee took to the task. The old worries still emerged but with encouragement and reassurance they took up the challenge. Hardy and alpine-house orchids were to be jointly assessed by the Joint Rock Garden Plant Committee and the Orchid Committee with the former taking the lead.

It is still not possible for Wisley to take on the years of trialling that would be needed for most orchids, so a manageable list was slowly gathered through discussion and expert referral. The problem of unnamed and wrongly named cultivars is still a major issue but

it is hoped that in future, more breeders can be encouraged to register their plants with the RHS, as International Cultivar Registration Authority for Orchid Hybrids. By doing so, all orchids that prove to be of outstanding quality would be available for consideration for an AGM. Award-winning plants should enjoy a boost in sales and publicity, so benefitting the breeder, as well as the consumer who gets a higher quality plant. This raises the profile of the AGM as an indicator of excellence, and hopefully will lead to improved labelling of orchids.

Naming and availability

It was decided that no hybrid would be considered for an AGM unless it had a registered name (to be found in the RHS hybrid orchid register, available online at: <http://apps.rhs.org.uk/horticulturaldatabase/orchidregister/orchidregister.asp>). This guideline unfortunately ruled out many of the most popular houseplants as supermarket *Phalaenopsis* are rarely named. An exception was made for orchids that already had a consistent trade name, were well-known plants and were readily available, but whose parentage is, so far, unregistered.

Availability was another problem. Plants appealing to hobbyists are hard to source from local garden centres. The number of specialist nurseries in Britain is diminishing and even fewer operate a laboratory for tissue culture. Buyers are heavily reliant on mericlones from Taiwan and the Netherlands. It is hoped that nurseries will be encouraged to grow AGM plants and thus make them more widely available.

Hardiness and reflowering

The word Garden in the award's title had given rise to concern but it was confirmed that in this context, garden refers to any space used for growing, including under glass. Each AGM plant is assigned a hardiness rating.

TEMPERATURE GUIDE TO RHS HARDINESS RATINGS			
RATING	MINIMUM TEMPERATURE	CATEGORY	DEFINITION
H1a	Warmer than 15°C	Tropical	Requires growing under glass all year round
H1b	10 to 15°C	Subtropical	Requires heated glass; may be grown outside in summer in some areas but best grown under glass all year round
H1c	5 to 10°C	Warm temperate	May be grown outside in most areas of the UK during the summer if temperatures are high enough
H2	1 to 5°C	Tender	Requires unheated glass
H3	-5 to 1°C	Half hardy	Hardy in coastal/mild areas except in hard winters and at risk from sudden (early) frosts. May be hardy elsewhere with shelter. Requires frost-free protection in winter
H4	-10 to -5°C	Hardy	Hardy outside in an average winter throughout the UK
H5	-15 to -10°C	Hardy	Hardy outside in a cold winter throughout the UK
H6	-20 to -15°C	Hardy	Hardy outside in winter throughout the UK and northern Europe
H7	Colder than -20°C	Very hardy	Hardy in the severest European continental climates



Orchids were only considered for an AGM if they could be easily reflowered at home, given the right growing conditions

Temperate and tropical orchids fall into hardiness groups H1 to H2 (left). Many can also be grown as houseplants, as indicated in the table overleaf.

There is no grading system for AGM awards. To qualify, plants must reach a standard considered to be consistently good. The Committee concentrated on cultivars that are grow well when given the correct conditions and that the home grower would be able to reflower with a degree of success, and that are ideally available from more than one supplier.

Creating a shortlist

Slowly suggestions were put forward, discussed several times, sifted and sorted until a list of 35 recommendations emerged. This includes a couple of hardy orchids recently

awarded or whose previous award was confirmed. The Orchid Committee is tasked to add to the list and this can be done at anytime throughout the year. The committee welcomes suggestions, with supporting comments, of outstanding orchids for consideration. AGM plants will be reviewed regularly, and proposals made to remove plants from the list if they fail in any of the criteria.

All the orchids that have received an AGM from the Orchid Committee to date are listed overleaf. Their suitability as houseplants is also indicated. This is not a requirement of the AGM scheme but it was thought to be helpful because most orchids in the UK are sold to be grown as houseplants. All 35 AGM orchids

will be profiled in a series of articles in *The Orchid Review*, beginning with these seven outstanding orchids.

1 and 2 Aliceara Peggy Ruth Carpenter

The parents of this hybrid are *Aliceara* Tahoma Glacier x *Miltonia* Purple Queen. The hybrid was made and registered by Everglades Orchids in 1980, and for many years it was known as a *Beallara*. *Aliceara* is an intergeneric cross between plants in the genera *Brassia*, *Miltonia* and *Oncidium*. Milton Carpenter's work at Everglades Orchids produced several *Oncidium* intergeneric hybrids that can be grown in the home or an intermediate greenhouse.

The *Miltonia* in the parentage of *Aliceara* Peggy Ruth Carpenter is

responsible for the large prominent lip, and the soft pink colouring makes this a pleasing choice as a houseplant. It can be found in flower from winter into early summer, but under normal growing conditions flowering occurs in spring or summer. Each spike carries four or more blooms that last four to six weeks. A large, mature plant can carry multiple flower stems.

When young, plants of *Aliceara* Peggy Ruth Carpenter can be grown in a north- or west-facing window, avoiding the full sun. But after a couple of years, well-grown plants will have outgrown the windowsill. Day temperatures of about 20°C are preferable with nights not below 13°C. However this is a tolerant plant, which is one of reasons it was awarded an AGM, and it can survive in temperatures up to 29°C. It should not be allowed to dry out completely nor to sit in water but high humidity would be advantageous, if available. Feed regularly and repot every two years in a coarse grade potting mix.

This reliable grex has been continually propagated since it became available. It can regularly be found at orchid nurseries and shows, and occasionally appears in supermarkets and DIY stores.

3 and 4 Cymbidium Castle of Mey 'Pinkie' AM/RHS

The parents of this hybrid are *Cymbidium* Putana x *C. Western Rose*. It was made by McBean's Orchids and registered by the nursery in 1982. This shell pink, miniature *Cymbidium* has been a favourite for many years.

Cymbidium plants are some of the easiest orchids to grow in a cool environment, and are good for cut flowers. Large-flowered, standard *Cymbidium* hybrids have been bred from species originating mostly in the foothills of the Himalayas, north-east India and adjacent countries. The miniature *Cymbidium* has been produced by crossing larger flowered types with small-growing species from Asia. The general use of the term miniature can be misleading to new growers as plants reach, on average, 45cms in height with flowers around 5cm across. Each spike can carry 10 or more blooms which may last up to three months, given good growing conditions. A mature plant can carry multiple spikes. Flowering takes place over the winter/spring period with blooming time affected both by previous summer conditions and light levels.

Cymbidium Castle of Mey 'Pinkie'

grows best with day temperatures around 16°C and nights around 10°C. It will survive and bloom outside this temperature range, but not so well. Light levels should always be good but direct sun avoided. Water thoroughly when the growing medium is almost dry and allow to drain. A buoyant atmosphere (good humidity and air movement) would be advantageous. Fertilize regularly and repot after flowering when pot bound, probably every two years. The practice of putting the plant outside after any danger of frost has past and bringing it back inside before the first frosts arrive is a sound one and will aid flower spike initiation. *Cymbidium* require a definite day/night temperature differential to produce good spikes for the next season. Find a spot in dappled shade for its summer home and acclimatize gradually when bringing back inside.

5 and 6 Cymbidium Strathbraan 'Cooksbridge Pearl'

This hybrid's parents are *Cymbidium* Putana x *C. New Dimension*. It is another of McBean's Orchids



Oncidium Sweet Sugar



Oncidium Sweet Sugar

ORCHIDS CURRENTLY AWARDED AN AGM		
AGM ORCHID NAME	HARDINESS RATING	SUITABLE AS A HOUSEPLANT
<i>Aliceara</i> Peggy Ruth Carpenter	H1a	✓
<i>Bletilla striata</i>	H4	
<i>Brassia</i> Eternal Wind	H1a	✓
<i>Coelogyne cristata</i>	H1a	✓
<i>Cymbidium</i> Castle of Mey 'Pinkie' AM/RHS	H1c	
<i>Cymbidium</i> Dorothy Stockstill	H1c	
<i>Cymbidium</i> Golden Elf	H1b	✓
<i>Cymbidium</i> Icho Tower	H1c	
<i>Cymbidium lowianum</i>	H1c	
<i>Cymbidium</i> Sarah Jean 'Ice Cascade'	H1c	
<i>Cymbidium</i> Sleeping Nymph	H1c	
<i>Cymbidium</i> Strathbraan 'Cooksbridge Pearl'	H1c	
<i>Dendrobium</i> Berry	H1b	✓
<i>Dendrobium kingianum</i>	H1b	✓
<i>Ludisia discolor</i>	H1a	✓
<i>Oncidesa</i> Sweet Sugar	H1a	✓
<i>Oncidium</i> Sharry Baby	H1a	✓
<i>Oncidium</i> Twinkle	H1a	✓
<i>Oncidopsis</i> Nelly Isler	H1a	✓
<i>Oncostele</i> Midnight Miracles 'Masai Red'	H1a	✓
<i>Oncostele</i> Midnight Miracles 'Masai Splash'	H1a	✓
<i>Oncostele</i> Wildcat	H1a	✓
<i>Paphiopedilum</i> Clair de Lune	H1a	✓
<i>Paphiopedilum</i> insigne	H1b	✓
<i>Paphiopedilum</i> Leeanum	H1a	✓
<i>Paphiopedilum</i> Pinocchio	H1a	✓
<i>Phalaenopsis</i> amabilis	H1a	✓
<i>Phalaenopsis</i> Be Tris	H1a	✓
<i>Phalaenopsis</i> Brother Little Amaglad	H1a	✓
<i>Phalaenopsis</i> Brother Pico Sweetheart	H1a	✓
<i>Prosthechea cochleata</i>	H1b	✓
<i>Pterostylis curta</i>	H2	✓
<i>Spiranthes cernua</i> 'Chadds Ford'	H4	
<i>Stenoglottis longifolia</i>	H1b	✓
<i>Zygopetalum</i> James Strauss 'Scentsation'	H1b	✓



Oncidium Twinkle 'Fragrant Fantasy'

The suitability of the 35 AGM orchids for cultivation as houseplants has also been indicated



Oncidium Twinkle 'Fragrant Fantasy'

registrations from 1982, and has the same seed parent as *C. Castle of Mey*. *Cymbidium* Strathbraan 'Cooksbridge Pearl' is a reliable bloomer and one of several available clones from the Strathbraan grex. The colour range of the seedlings varied from deep red through to ice-green and white. This clone, 'Cooksbridge Pearl', is a good white with an occasional red dot on the flower. It has proved to be very

floriferous and the plant size remains manageable. When mature, four spikes is not unusual for a plant in a 2-litre pot. Growing conditions are the same as for *C. Castle of Mey*.

7 and 8 Oncidesa Sweet Sugar

The parents of this hybrid are *Oncidesa* Aloha Iwanaga x *Gomesa varicosa*. In 1837 *Gomesa varicosa* was described by Lindley as *Oncidium*

varicosa. This species is found from Brazil to Argentina. It was moved to *Gomesa* by Chase *et al.* in 2009.

The hybrid produced by crossing this species with *Oncidesa* Aloha Iwanaga is one of the most cloned orchids in the world, and sold by the thousand both as cut flowers and as plants. It was made by the Sato nursery in Hawaii and registered by them in 1990. This vibrant yellow-

flowered plant has the common name dancing ladies, the large lip bearing some resemblance to a full skirt. For many years *Oncidesa* Sweet Sugar was classified as an *Oncidium* and can still be found being sold under its old name. Most orchid nurseries sell these plants and they are regularly available in large supermarkets and DIY stores. It is usual to buy them as young plants with a single, branching spike but mature plants will produce more than one stem.

The large-scale production of this plant is in response to mass demand throughout the world. Its brilliant colour appeals to many cultures. In western Europe, *Oncidesa* Sweet Sugar is a good grower, and is ideally suited to cultivation in centrally heated homes. It produces spikes of long-lasting flowers that often remain in good condition for more than two months. In the greenhouse it is best grown with day temperatures of 22–25°C, and nights not below 13°C. But it is a tolerant plant, which is one of reasons it was awarded an AGM, and can survive much higher temperatures

as long as humidity and air movement are increased. Avoid growing it in full midday sun but good light levels are important. When growing it as a houseplant an east- or west-facing window or even a lightly shaded south-facing window would be fine. The compost should not be allowed to dry out completely. Feed regularly and repot every other year using a medium-grade orchid growing mix or bark.

9 and 10 *Oncidium Twinkle*

The parents of this dwarf hybrid are *Oncidium cheiroporum* × *O. sotoanum*. *Oncidium Twinkle* was made and registered by WWG Moir, Hawaii, in 1958. It has been successfully remade throughout the world. Today, the plants available in the UK are usually grown from flasks originating in Taiwan, and are often grown on in the Netherlands.

Parent plant *Oncidium cheiroporum* is a dwarf species found from Mexico to Colombia. Its inflorescences are slender and branching with masses of small yellow flowers. It was found by Warszewicz on the Chiriqui volcano,

Panama, 2,500m above sea level, and described by Reichenbach in 1852.

The other parent, *Oncidium sotoanum* from Mexico to Costa Rica, was first described scientifically in 2010 by Jiménez & Hágsater. At first glance this seems impossible as the Orchid Registrar would not have allowed registration of a hybrid without both parents having been previously named. However, Julian Shaw, International Orchid Hybrid Registrar, explained in an email that '*Oncidium sotoanum* is a new name for a plant that was in cultivation for years under the wrong name. It was grown for years as *Oncidium ornithorhynchum* but this name was misapplied. The plant with pink flowers from Mexico, frequently grown as *Oncidium ornithorhynchum* has been named *O. sotoanum* after an examination of the type specimen, held in Paris, revealed that genuine *O. ornithorhynchum* plants have yellow-and-brown-flowers, and the species comes from Colombia.'

Oncidium Twinkle is available in colours ranging from cream through

shades of pink to a soft red. It is a compact grower, ideal for an east-facing windowsill. One of its main attractions is the spicy vanilla scent of its mass of blooms. Most plants will have several inflorescences creating a 'frothy' effect. Successional flowering gives a blooming period of two months or more. Added to this is the prospect of more than one flowering each year, with the main season being autumn.

Its growing needs are easily met. Indirect light and day temperatures around 20°C are adequate, with nights not below 13°C. Regular feeding and watering is beneficial year-round. Do not let the plant dry out completely. A medium-grade orchid mix or bark is an ideal growing medium. Repot in spring, every other year, when the plant is not in flower.

11 and 12 *Oncostele Midnight Miracles 'Masai Red'*, and 13 *'Masai Splash'*

The parents of this grex, and so both these cultivars, are *Rhynchoatele bictoniensis* × *Oncidium cariniferum*. The cross was made by Truford Orchids, California, and registered by the American nursery Hu-Bro in 1983.

Parent plant *Rhynchoatele bictoniensis* grows in humid forests from Mexico to Central America, at around 1,800–2,800m. It was first discovered by George Ure Skinner in 1835, and was described by Bateman as *Cyrtochilum bictoniense* in the 1838 part of his huge, 10-part, lavishly illustrated book *The Orchidaceae of Mexico and Guatemala*. The species was transferred to *Odontoglossum* in 1840 by Lindley, and has been commonly grown in nurseries under that name ever since, despite being moved to *Lemboglossum* in 1988, then to *Rhynchoatele* in 1998.

Warszewicz discovered *Oncidium cariniferum* in 1854 in the Cordillera de Chiriqui, Panama. It is now known from Costa Rica to Panama. It was described by Reichenbach in 1852



Oncostele Midnight Miracles 'Masai Splash'

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Mature plants of *Oncostele* Midnight Miracles remain a suitable size for a windowsill, and most produce two flower spikes



Oncostele Midnight Miracles 'Masai Red'

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Oncostele Midnight Miracles 'Masai Red'

David Ridgeway

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as *Odontoglossum cariniferum* but moved to *Oncidium* by Beer in 1854.

Plants of *Oncostele* Midnight Miracles are widely available in the UK under the trade name Masai, and are sometimes labelled as either Masai Red or Masai Splash. In order to make the names acceptable for the AGM award, these names have been recognized by the RHS as cultivars. 'Masai Red' always has a solid, dark red lip, but the amount of lighter colouration on the lip of 'Masai Splash' will vary according to the temperature and light levels under which it has been grown. Currently there are other clones of *Oncostele* Midnight Miracles available in the USA, and they are often seen at shows there, but to date we have not come across them in the UK.

Oncostele Midnight Miracles plants can be purchased in flower from late autumn to early summer. They can be grown as houseplants or in an intermediate greenhouse. Their

cultivation needs are very similar to those of *Aliceara* Peggy Ruth Carpenter (p37–8). The main differences are that the flowers will not last as long if grown at the top of the temperature range, that *Oncostele* Midnight Miracles plants do not grow as fast nor bulk up to the same extent. Most will produce only two flower spikes when mature.

Looking to the future

By recommending these plants the RHS Orchid Committee hopes to encourage new hobbyists to try, with a degree of confidence, growing orchids other than *Phalaenopsis*. It does not however, want to discourage growing of the moth orchid and future AGM articles will include some outstanding examples of this favourite genus. ■

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