

South Coast Orchid Club

GROWING SARCOCHILUS – GEORGE ABEL

Welcome to the wonderful world of *Sarcochilus* (pronounced SAR-KOK-I-LUS) as per Hawkes “Encyclopedia of Cultivated Orchids”. If you can’t remember that just call them Sarcs. These wonderful Australian Native Orchids have come a long way since the first hybrid was registered in 1963 by Ira Butler. It was of course, the crossing of *Hartmannii* and *Fitzgeraldii* registered as *Fitzhart* there have been many crossings done since – gradually becoming more complex. I say gradually because as they become more complex they also become less viable either as pod or pollen parents. To date there have only been 201 Hybrids registered which is a very small number compared to the multi thousands of hybrid registrations of some of the other cultivated species.

However progress has been made and we now have a variety of colours and markings ranging from various shades of yellow, green, pink, orange, and purple through to solid red. The solid reds are still extremely rare. The markings also vary greatly with different sizes of spots, blotches, stripes, plus the shadings of the centers and edges. The centers are also of various colours from the small to covering 80% of the flower. The size of the flowers have also progressed from the normal 10 cent size to some being considerably larger than a 50 cent piece.

One of the more remarkable things about *Sarcochilus* is that each growth continues to extend and flower year after year with the result that you can have many spikes in a relatively small pot. I rarely grow beyond a 125mm (5”) squat pot with my best result ever in that size pot being 42 spikes – in a full 125mm squat pot 20 spikes is quite common. I said that a growth keeps on growing and flowering but myself I only allow them to flower 3 years or at most 4 years. For me they become too leggy and unattractive so I break them up. Incidentally when I break up, it is always into single growths- experience has taught me that this is certainly the best way to go. Most of them flower the next year.

Although growing *Sarcochilus* it is in its infancy in South Australia it is very popular in the eastern states. Warren Thomas and I go to the native orchid shows in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria in October/November every second year and just to Victoria in the alternate years. To illustrate their popularity just imagine if you can the Sydney Native Orchid Society Show in early November where they judge *Sarcochilus* in it different categories. The Maribyrnong Orchid society have their show during the second weekend in November and can have up to 900 *Sarcochilus* on display. A truly magnificent sight. What amazed us more is that they have thirty or forty people lined up a half an hour before the show starts. Warren and I got there at that time thinking we would be first in line. Fat chance! They are there early so they can have first pick of the *Sarcochilus* on the Trading Table, and we now know that is the same every year. This gives you some idea of the popularity in the eastern states.

Perhaps before going into my method of growing I should mention that I grow them quite differently from the accepted method and certainly differently to all the interstate growers I have visited, and probably differently to the South Australian growers as well.

There are there main differences in my culture and I will cover them one at a time.

1. **Sunlight** – in the eastern states they grow them in dark conditions to emulate they say their conditions in nature. They are hybrids we grow today and I personally am trying to grow them in a lot better than they grow in their natural habitat. I have been to shade houses in the eastern states where conditions are so dark that you have to stop just inside the door for your eyes to adjust. The plants in these conditions have one thing in common – the growths lay down and the leave turn upwards. I think this is an indication that they need more light. I grow mine in strong light using sandstone (cream) shade cloth with the shade house positioned so that it gets full sun from sunrise to sunset, they love it!
2. **Potting mix** – the general mix used is 15mm to 20mm bark, which I think is too dry for plants with an epiphytic type root system. I therefore set out to produce a mix that would retain moisture without getting wet. I made up several mixes using varying proportions of coco peat, 6mm pine bark, marble chips and madenwell and then settled on the one that produced the best results. I will continue to use this ad infinitum, as you would expect of me I measure each ingredient exactly.
3. **Fertiliser** - other growers use either very little fertilizer or none at all. This is to be expected with plants being grown in dark conditions. I am a very heavy feeder – my axiom is if you want to grow plant well you need to have plenty of light and give them plenty of fertilizer. My main fertilizing is by a slow release fertilizer I call magic beads. They are designed to make plants grow and flower and will not burn the roots no matter how much you put on I also foliar feed daily. You can certainly grow them successfully without this but I think I grow them better with it. I use a hills pump spray with blossom booster at full strength from April to September and Peters Orchid Special again at full strength from October to March. I also add 1 eyedropper drop of ezirroot (a root stimulant) per Litre it takes about ten minutes to spray 2000 Sarc.

I have no difficulty breaking up Sarcophilus without them going backwards because the root systems are so good and with my method of growing the leaves are very thick and retain a lot of moisture which is very important because they do not have a pseudo bulb. As mentioned before I like to break up into single growths and pot into 80mm (approx 3”) pots. The potting mix I use is on the dry side and I only foliar feed for the first six to eight weeks with an extra foliar spray or six if the weather is warm. This spray takes about 30 seconds for the whole shade house. From this you will realize that nearly all of my watering is by overhead misting. I do however flush the pots monthly or fortnightly when it becomes hot.

I have been growing orchids of several genera for about 35 years and have never been interested in showing them. However I am genuinely interested in helping people grow their orchids better. So if you need help particularly with you Sarc I will be only to happy to give you that help.

To demonstrate that my method of breaking up works I brought a few plants that were broken up into single growths in November 2003, all are in spike and have multiple growths coming away. One of them has already had 11 spikes over the last four years and has another three spikes this year. The perfect example showing how each growth keeps flowering year after year.

This article is also being published in the Orchid Club of SA and Murray Bridge Orchid club bulletins.