

DENDROBIUM CUCUMERINUM - THE AMAZING GHERKIN ORCHID.

Alex. D. Hawkes.

The following article, which appeared in "The Orchid Weekly" will be of great interest to members, it shows just what an American orchid lover thinks of one of our more unusual native epiphytic orchids. The author has many orchid books to his credit and is also the Editor of "The Orchid Journal" and "The Orchid Weekly".

Some time ago my good friend Hermon Slade, noted orchidist of Australia, kindly sent me some plants of a most extraordinary dwarf epiphytic Dendrobium, knowing of my particular interest in this genus. Among these were several specimens of the remarkable Gherkin Orchid, Dendrobium cucumerinum (den-droe-bee-um koo-koo-me-rye-num), a plant so rare in cultivation (at least outside of its native haunts) that I had not even included it in the initial manuscript of my Manual of the Cultivated Orchids!

These plants quickly sent out myriad heavy dull-white roots on the tree-fern cubes I attached them to, and just as I write this (May 3rd) the first one has expanded its flowers. Though I have a considerable number of peculiar orchids in my personal collection here in Coconut Grove, I must say that this little Dendrobium must rank high among the true oddities -- not only in its flowers, but also in its vegetative structure.

Imagine, if you will, a number of small prickly cucumber pickles, matte green in colour, slightly more than an inch long (and $3/8$ " in diameter, on the average), set at casual intervals along a stout little olive-green, yellowish-flushed, red-brown-ringed rhizome. No pseudobulbs are present, and at first glance one can scarcely believe that it is a living plant, and not some prank played by an overly-avid orchidist!

The inflorescence is very short, in my specimen considerably less than an inch; it is heavily clothed with papery, semi-transparent dull-coloured bracts, and bears four flowers -- which opened within a two-hour period as I watched them last evening. Measured from bottom to top, and discounting the curley-cues of the segments, these blossoms are slightly more than $5/8$ " long.

If someone were to design the ideal flower for this incredible plant of "gherkins", then these would be sheer perfection!

The sepals and petals of Dendrobium cucumerinum are narrow and conspicuously recurved in their apical halves; the broad-based lateral sepals are first undulate, then have their apical parts extending inward toward the lip like tiny claws. They form a blunt, distinctly 2-lobed mentum, much like a spur, at the end of the flower. These segments are all, in my specimen, an odd green-white, with slender branching very dark red streaks near their bases, these lines also being present on the outer surfaces. The lip is three-lobed, with the small lateral lobes embracing the stout broad whitish column, which is again marked with this very dark red shade. The underside of the lip is striped with dull almost wine-red, and the flaring, down-curved, very crisped and frilly midlobe is white with a central cluster of very crisped (and very beautiful) tiny magenta keels, with scattered magenta dots and blotches extending outwards toward the side margins.

The late Rev. H.M.R. Rupp, in his admirable work on the Orchids of New South Wales (1943), notes the flowers as yellowish-white or greenish-white, striate with red, but this certainly does not do their intricacy justice! The species, Dendrobium cucumerinum, is an old one, having been described as long ago as 1842 by Macleay. It is known in many areas of New South Wales, and extends into Queensland, growing apparently always on trees of various sorts.

The Gherkin Orchid is an incredible species, one which I feel sure almost everyone would enjoy having in his collection -- if only for its curious appearance, whether in bloom or not. But as yet it is excessively rare in cultivation, and I know of no commercial source for it outside of Australia. I might remark, in closing these comments, that the flowers give off a perfectly foul odour during the warm hours of the day! But even this cannot possibly detract from its unique charm.

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