

DARLINGTONIA CALIFORNICA 'OTHELLO'

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Iago: *O! beware my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on....*

W. Shakespeare, *Othello*

The Nature of Cultivars

As an editor of Carnivorous Plant Newsletter I have the luxury of being able to peek ahead at the articles that will be appearing in future issues. I see cultivar descriptions on the way. Even though cultivars have been discussed in the newsletter before, they are still widely misunderstood by carnivorous plant growers. In this article, I hope to clarify some common misconceptions about cultivar propagation.

First, you may be wondering just what is a cultivar anyway! The term cultivar is a contraction of cultivated-variety, and means a plant (or set of very similar plants) which has some noteworthy characteristics. Furthermore, a cultivar must be described in some widely published journal and the author of the cultivar description must register with an International Registration Authority.

If you look at the seed bank, you see we have plenty of interesting plants available with descriptors after their names (such as —veined or —wide leaf). These are not cultivars because the plants have not been properly described in a publication. If you obtain seed of *S. flava*—veined and grow it, you have an idea of what to expect but cannot really be sure. Is the venation on the pitcher tube? the lid? or both? Is the venation actually on the petals? Is the plant a red-throated type? Is the plant vigorous or weak? All this is uncertain. But if you have a cultivar you know that you have a plant selected for a distinct set of exceptional qualities—in essence a pedigreed plant.

Many people mistakenly think that cultivars may only be propagated by vegetative (asexual) means such as cuttings or tissue culture. The truth is that cultivars may be propagated by any method, as long as the plants resulting from propagation still match the original cultivar description. This is why the cultivar description is so important. Consider the two *Sarracenia* cultivars described in this issue (pages 38-40). The unique beauty and character of each derive from a balance of many components such as pitcher size and color pattern, plant durability, flower color, etc. In order to propagate either cultivar and retain all these characters in the same balance, you must use vegetative means. Even self pollinating these plants would produce a new generation of plants very much unlike the originals, and would therefore no longer be the cultivars Larry Mellichamp and Rob Gardner produced.

On the other hand, if a cultivar has characteristics that are all faithfully reproduced even by sexual propagation (i.e. by seed), then the seed-grown plants which match the cultivar description would themselves be members of that same cultivar. For example, suppose a *Dionaea* cultivar that always had two traps per leaf was developed and named *Dionaea* 'The Hydra'. If seed obtained by selfing *Dionaea* 'The Hydra' yielded offspring that were also double-trapped, they would be *Dionaea* 'The Hydra'. Suppose you crossed this cultivar with a normal *Dionaea*, and of the seed only 25% of the resulting plants had double traps—those new double-trapped plants would also be specimens of *Dionaea* 'The Hydra'.

You can always tell if a plant in Carnivorous Plant Newsletter is a cultivar because we always enclose cultivar names with single quotes, instead of the dash or double quotes we use for plain descriptive information. Look at the seedbank listing for examples. I encourage you to adopt this typography in your own collection lists.

In another article I will describe how to establish cultivar names for noteworthy plants you may have developed in your own breeding programs. You may be surprised at how easy it is. Indeed, in my opinion the greatest task for the originator of a cultivar is ensuring the plant becomes widely cultivated by many people. Make sure you have at least a few dozen specimens to distribute before you publish a cultivar description. It is useless to have a cultivar which is grown by one petty person who greedily monopolizes all the specimens of that plant, lording them over other horticulturists. Such a cultivar is doomed to extinction because of the inevitability of greenhouse power failures, errors in cultivation, or even death of the cultivator.

The Nature of 'Othello'

In the spring of 1997 I discovered that a seep in the Californian Sierra Nevada housed an anthocyanin-free form of *Darlingtonia californica* (Meyers-Rice, 1997). While an exciting find, in all other respects the plant is identical with the other *Darlingtonia* plants at this site. I could award this plant a new Latin name (perhaps at the rank of variety or form), but I do not think such a minor color variant merits such a major designation. However, since this plant is of considerable interest to horticulturists, it deserves a cultivar name—*Darlingtonia* 'Othello'.

The cultivar *Darlingtonia* 'Othello' is characterized by one feature—a lack of red pigment in the leaves and especially the flowers (Figure 1, page 40, bottom). As such, this cultivar may be propagated by seed as long as the resulting plants also lack anthocyanin. This cultivar measures well against other horticultural standards—its numerous pitchers are large, well-formed, and long lasting, and the plant liberally produces new plants by stolons.

A greenish complexion was formerly held to be indicative of jealousy, and as all the green-eyed cat family "mock the meat they feed on", so jealousy mocks its victim by loving and loathing it at the same time.

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable, 1894

Darlingtonia 'Othello' is securely established in cultivation for I have already distributed seed to seedbanks around the world, and the seed is germinating readily (Wim Leys, personal communication, 1998; and others). Additional seed will be harvested during the 1998 growing season for distribution. All the progeny that germinate and bear green flowers will fit the description of *Darlingtonia* 'Othello'.

This year *Darlingtonia* 'Othello' will be tested for the presence of anthocyanin by Phil Sheridan at Meadowview Research Station. It may be that tiny amounts of this pigment do occur in the plant. Since the main character of this cultivar is its green flowers, such a finding would be interesting but not important to the validity of its cultivar name.

Why the epithet 'Othello'? Shakespeare's tragic figure was great and noble, but bedeviled by a furious jealousy. As his twisted companion Iago reminded him, jealousy is symbolized by the color green. Now there are two Othellos, one being Shakespeare's general mocked by the "green ey'd monster" of jealousy, and the other the voracious plant that feeds upon the meat drawn to its green maw.

References:

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