SOPHRONITIS COCCINEA AND ITS IMPACT ON MODERN HYBRIDS

by Wayne Bourdette

If you've ever seen any Sopnronitis species in bloom it is hard not to admire them. Who could not like a plant that is only 2-3 inches tall with a brilliant orange to red flower over 2 inches in natural spread. In other words the flower is in many cases much larger than the growth it matures on.

These marvelous plants occur naturally in Southern Brazil and in the countries contiguous to the Brazilian border at that point. This includes Uruguay, Northeastern Argentina, and Paraguay. We have seen at least one plant of Sophronitis cernua from Paraguay within the last year in bloom in the Northeast Region of the AOS Judging System.

Some of the habitat information found in reference books, describes these plants growing in trees, in extremely humid, moss-hung, rather shady forests at medium elevations. This is kind of interesting considering that most collectors show pictures of these great little plants growing on virtually leafless trees, in full sun and at relatively cool temperatures (45-50°F. at night). Remember these points when trying to grow and flower them successfully.

The genus Sopnronitis was originally named in 1826 by Lindley when a Mrs. Harrison of Liverpool, England bloomed a plant of Sophronitis cernua (incorrectly labeled acunae sometimes by growers and in publications). Sophronitis is derived from the Greek word sophron which means modest in reference to the size of the individual flowers of S. cernua.

It's fascinating to briefly look back to what was done with S. coccinea now almost 100 years or more ago by the early English hybridizers. Names that constantly pop up in the historical works on orchid breeders include Veitch, Charlesworth, Marriot, and Bull. These were the true pioneers, who left us a legacy of knowledge on how S. coccinea benaved when ored with certain related species. In 1886, Veitch registered Sc. Batemanniana (C. intermedia aquinii x S. coccinea). This is truly one of my favorite primary hybrids producing flowers in a rainbow of colors with significant splashes on their petals. They are quite striking and vary dramatically between different clones. Another terrific hybrid was made by Veitch in 1890, Sc. Calypso (C. loddigesii x S. coccinea). This hybrid increased the size of the Sopnronitis flower and produced rose pink flowers on very dwarf plants.

In 1898, Charlesworth made Sc. Cleopatra (C. guttata x S. coccinea). The guttata influence seems to darken and intensify colors and offers a gene pool for further use in hybridizing. I have a clone of Potinara Scarlet Dynasty which has Sc. Cleopatra as one parent and it is a very intense red flower with its only fault that it is starry shaped.

One final early hybrid that has been used as a parent for additional generations is a cross originally made in 1904 by Bull called Sc. Doris (C. dowiana x S. coccinea), the most famous

clone of which is probably 'Pamela'. These plants are quite small and have a good red color and nice round full flower.

Let's get into some of the more recent hybrids and see what wonderful things have occurred since those early efforts with the primary hybrids. Sl. Jinn (L. milleri x S. coccinea) was a cross which generated very dwarf plants with starry shaped flowers about 2" across in the orange-red tones and might have 2-3 flowers per stem. Even larger flowers were generated by another cross, Sl. Psyche (L. cinnabarina x S. coccinea). This grex produces up to five flowers per inflorescence and each can be almost 3" across. The orange-red flowers are produced on plants about 6" tall.

One exceptional hybrid that has produced a range of brightly colored flowers from solid yellows to reds, to reds with yellow lips was Sc. Beaufort (C. luteola x S. coccinea). It has retained the very dwarf form of the Sophronitis parent while creating a whole host of exciting color combinations. This grex was not made until 1963, but since that time has been used as a parent of mini-cattleyas over 50 times. I guess that says something about qualities that it imparts to its offspring. When Sc. Beaufort was crossed by C. loddigesii in 1985 another exciting hybrid resulted, named Sc. Crystelle Smith. The flower size increased while the plants stayed small and a whole population of very high quality flowers resulted in pink tones with yellow lips.

This article only scratches the surface of this terrific group of hybrids that offer small plants with brilliantly colored flowers. There are currently over 25 hybrid genera from Bishopara to Stacyara which all have Sophronitis as one part of the parentage. These dwarf hybrids will always have a place in orchid collections as the show they put on in a small space is difficult to beat.

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