

# The Orchid of the Month: December, 2013

By Bruce Adams

## **Paphiopedilum Robinianum**



**Figure 1: Paphiopedilum Robinianum**

"There are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't." – Robert Benchley

Over the years growing orchids, I've noticed that there are two kinds of growers: those who absolutely adore slipper orchids to the exclusion of all other orchids, and those who have none in their collection, nor any interest in adding any. I am not really sure why this is. I don't know any growers that can't stand Cattleya, Oncidium, or Masdevallia, but it seems that when the talk turns to Paphiopedilum, Phragmipedium, or even Cypripedium, opinions often come with a bit of an attitude. Of course, it's all in good fun. We orchid growers love talking about our favorites, while pretending to bash all others. Species lovers look down upon hybrids. Hybridizers look at a species and consider what they can do to "improve" that awkward little flower. It's all part of our playful competition to grow the best and coolest plants we can. And frankly what is better and cooler than an orchid, any orchid?

Paphiopedilum Robinianum is a cross of *P. lowii* with *P. parishii*. It is a very old cross, made in 1893 by Linden. The Linden name is well known among orchid and tropical plant lovers. From 1885 to 1906, Jean Linden published his famous *Lindenia: Iconography of Orchids* (1). He also took over as director of *L'illustration Horticole* in 1870. Both of these volumes contained beautiful chromolithographs of numerous orchids.



**Figure 2: *Cyrtopidium Ashburtoniae* from L'Illustration Horticole**

*Paphiopedilum parishii* is a very slow growing multifloral species. I grew this many years ago as one of my first orchids, back in the days when you could easily get many species that today are rarely available. It did well for a few years, and bloomed, but when I went to college, a lot of my plants went downhill and died. College dorms are not conducive to orchid culture, although I tried. *P. parishii* has a spike with many flowers, up to ten! (2) It has narrow, twisted, purple petals, a narrow greenish lip, and a white dorsal with some green striping. All the flowers tend to bloom at once, creating a beautiful show.

*Paphiopedilum lowii* is another multifloral. It blooms more successively than *P. parishii*, although there will usually be several flowers open at a time. The petals are yellowish with black spots at the basal portion, turning purple at the tips. The narrow pouch is a dull purplish green, and the dorsal is green with purple stripes. It is generally considered to be of relatively easy culture. (2)

So, one day, while sitting in his chair at the Club pour les Hommes Belgique, Monsieur Linden had a brainstorm. Why not cross the two species to get a colorful, multifloral, easy to grow *Paphiopedilum* hybrid? He quickly threw down his brandy and called his horse and carriage via the nineteenth century equivalent of a cell phone, i.e. he shouted for his footman. Then he hurried home to his greenhouse, promptly got tweezers in hand, found some pollinia on his *P. parishii*, and placed it onto his *P. lowii*. The rest, as they say, was an incredibly long wait for the capsule to ripen, the seeds to sprout, the plants to grow, etc.

I purchased my *P. Robinianum* from the now closed Golden Gate Orchids while at the Sacramento Orchid Society spring show. Of the several plants present, I had to decide if I wanted the plant with more growths or the plant with better quality flowers. I decided upon the latter, and for a while I was not sure if that was a good idea. I had a

blooming plant with only one new growth to replace the current bloomer. The other plant had about three growths. I believe that I made the wise choice for the long term, because I got a superior flower, although it has taken me two years to rebloom the plant. (I remember once, many years ago, Tom Barry of Sea Breeze Orchids in New York said he'd never buy a single growth paph. I now understand why.)

There is an excellent article, How to Grow Slipper Orchids, by Harold Koopowitz in the fall, 2012 issue of Orchid Digest. It gives formulae for many different mixes from the best growers. I combined a few of them to get a mix that I could put together for myself, based on the materials I had available. I pot my paphs in a mixture of equal parts medium and small Orchid mix, with some sponge rock, perlite, and charcoal thrown in. It works for me, because when the mix is fresh, it tends to dry out fairly quickly, so I don't risk overwatering the plants. I tend to put off repotting my paphs, which is not really a good idea. But this year I committed myself to repotting them twice yearly, and I think it is paying off.

I grow my paphs in a south window with a sheer curtain in place from early October to February, essentially filtering out the direct winter sun. I remove the curtain once the sun rises high enough not to shine directly on the plants. My paphs' leaves tend to be a bit soft, since they don't get strong enough light in their growing area. So, this year in October, I placed my paphs into my mini greenhouse (4' X 6') for a month to give them a tad more light. Then when the weather got cold, back inside they went. I was pleased when, in November, I noticed a spike emerging from the center of the older growth. It grew quickly, blooming in early December with beautiful flowers on a ten-inch spike. Currently I have one open, one opening, and one in bud. I like that I get the flowers opening in succession, because it stretches out the blooming period.

Feeding is done with the Michigan fertilizer for reverse osmosis water. I use a weak concentration, weekly, as the saying goes. Pests have been minimal, with only mealy bugs appearing here and there. I clean them up with an alcohol swab, and this keeps them under control.

Unlike Phalaenopsis, Cattleya, and just about all orchids under cultivation that I know of, Paphiopedilum do not respond to mericlone. Thus, every paph that you purchase is either a seedling or a division. This means that when you bloom your Paphiopedilum Robinium it is your own distinct clone. If you bring it in for judging, the award it may receive is for your individual plant. You can name the clone, and there is none identical to it in the world (the universe, depending on your cosmological view). I like that I have something unique, something that no one else has bloomed.

I'm one of those types of people who believe there are two types of orchid growers in the world: those that love orchids, and those that REALLY love orchids! I guess you know which type I am!



**Figure 3: Paphiopedilum Robinianum**

Footnotes:

- 1) Prints from the Past website: <http://www.printspast.com/orchid-prints-linden.htm>  
It should be noted that other sources give the dates as 1887 to 1901.
- 2) Paphiness Orchids website:  
[http://paphinessorchids.com/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://paphinessorchids.com/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1)

Sources:

- 1) Paphiness Orchids: <http://www.paphinessorchids.com/>
- 2) Piping Rock Orchids: <http://www.pipingrockorchids.com/>
- 3) Orchid Inn: <http://www.orchidinnusa.com/>
- 4) Many others. See Orchid Mall at [Orchidmall.com](http://Orchidmall.com)