

The Orchid of the Month: June, 2014

By Bruce Adams

Cattleya Irene Finney 'Spring's Best'



Figure 1: Cattleya Irene Finney 'Spring's Best'

One of the downsides of the recent revision of the Cattleya alliance has been that a number of different hybrids have become homonymous. Cattleya Irene Finney is a famous cross dating back to 1964. Or is it 1969? Now that *Laelia purpurata* has been changed to *Cattleya purpurata*, there are two Cattleya hybrids named Irene Finney. Although the species comprising these hybrids are different, the **genera** are now all reduced to *Cattleya*. This can be a problem for the orchid enthusiast. For instance, when you see a Cattleya Irene Finney for sale how can you be certain which one you are getting? Usually it will be the Cattleya Irene Finney with *Laelia purpurata* in the background; that big “foofy” lavender flower with a rich purple and yellow lip. But are you guaranteed this? No, not without an accompanying photo.

The second problem is that if you want to research the pedigree of a hybrid, that is, the lineage of its contributing species, you will encounter numerous crosses with the same name, followed by a year indicating when the cross was made. Go to the international orchid register site, and you will find Cattleya Irene Finney (1964) and Cattleya Irene Finney (1969). Search for the parents of Cattleya Irene Finney (1964), and you will find Cattleya Bruno Alberts listed as one parent. But wait! There is Cattleya Bruno Alberts (1946) and Bruno Alberts (1954). This goes on and on. What happens when two crosses were made in the same year? Do we then go with Cattleya Whatever (1959a) and Cattleya Whatever (1959b)? So thank you, splitters, for making my job so much more fun, but clarifying the phylogenetic relationships between the orchids!

Well, I did my research and discovered that the spring blooming Cattleya Irene Finney (1964) is comprised of many spring blooming species, such as *Cattleya mossiae*, *Cattleya purpurata*, and *Cattleya mendelii*, but also has a large portion of autumn blooming *Cattleya leudemannia*, and winter blooming *Cattleya trianae*. Overall, it appears that *mossiae* dominates, comprising a bit more than thirty-seven percent of the gene pool, with *Cattleya purpurata* contributing a bit more than twelve percent.(1)

Once again, it is helpful to know the background of your hybrid plant when deciding what conditions it can tolerate. Both *Cattleya mossiae* and *Cattleya purpurata* grow in a range of cool to warm conditions, with *C. purpurata* tolerating a wider range of temperatures.(2) Indeed, *Cattleya purpurata* can endure quite cold temperatures, provided that it is kept dry.(3) As a result, Cattleya Irene Finney can tolerate colder temperatures than you might expect of a Cattleya, and indeed, it did very well in my cold greenhouse with a minimum of about 40 degrees on the coldest nights of the year. It also did not mind occasional drops in humidity when my little space heater came on. The Santa Barbara Orchid Estate classifies this hybrid as one of their “temperature tolerant” plants, able to grow in a range of temperature from near freezing to over one

hundred degrees. That bodes well for trying one outdoors here in Sacramento, albeit in a protected microclimate.

I purchased my Cattleya Irene Finney from Orchids by Hausermann in Villa Park, IL, just out of Chicago. They have been selling orchids since 1959, and growing them since 1935. They are, indeed, one of the few older orchid companies remaining. I purchased my very first orchids from Hausermann's in 1976. The company has always had a nice combination of hybrids and species. Many of the species they used to sell are simply unobtainable today, but that's true of the hobby as a whole, I think.

A big part of the Hausermann's business used to be cut flowers. In fact, they still produce over 400,000 Cattleya blooms yearly. (4) Years ago, Hausermann's would offer a grab bag of previously bloomed plants used for cut flowers. These would be out of bloom, their choice, but very inexpensive. You could choose from lavender, white, or white with purple lips. What you got were big plants, ready to be divided and repotted. Alas, those days are gone, but they do have sales in which a few overgrown plants are offered. These plants are not specifically described as used for cut flowers, but my guess is that they were. So, when I saw a big Cattleya Irene Finney on sale, for the relatively small sum of eighteen dollars, I jumped at the chance. When the plants arrived I was able to get three healthy divisions. Two additional smaller divisions did not survive, but I suspect they would have in better conditions than I can offer. I repotted into pure Orchidata medium sized bark into six-inch clay pots.

I gave the plants medium bright light, so as to avoid burn from our hot bright Sacramento sun. The plants took off, growing new roots within a few weeks and starting new pseudobulbs that matured to the same size as the previous year's growth. I considered this a good sign that I was on my way to having some beautiful big purple flowers in a couple of years, fully expecting the plants to take a season off. But I was surprised last fall, when the growths matured with a sheath at the end of every one. They overwintered very easily in my little four by six foot greenhouse, and I placed them outside in late March. One day, I noticed the sheaths beginning to puff up a bit, as if filled with air. Could this be a sheath about to send out buds, even after only one year in my less than ideal conditions? Sure enough, a few weeks later, I began to see evidence of small buds forming. Finally in the last week of May, the buds opened into beautiful, large, fragrant flowers.

Cattleya Irene Finnley's flowers are impressive, with a wide spread and a beautiful three dimensionality to them that is lacking in many of today's flat, round flowers. During the day, I notice their powerful fragrance as soon as I come into the house. Many breeders do not breed for fragrance, which is an attribute not graded by the American Orchid Society when a plant is submitted for judging. They don't deliberately try to breed out fragrance, but it seems to be relegated to the back burner. That is unfortunate. A Cattleya flower without that sweet "orchid" smell is like a Van Gough painting in black and white. There's just something missing. I hope that in the future, breeders will put more effort into trying to get fragrance into their hybrids. I think it's a worthwhile effort.

There is a downside to these older hybrids. They are big. I mean, really big. From the base of the rhizome to the tip of the leaf, each pseudobulb of Cattleya Irene Finney is about twenty inches in length. And they are rangy as well, spreading their leaves out at awkward angles. When you have a four by six foot greenhouse, you can't house too many of these monsters. However, since they come back so well from divisions, I don't think it would be too difficult to keep them at a reasonable size, with proper diligence. These are plants that would benefit from the use of a hoop type stake, so that the leaves can be kept from bumping into your other plants, knocking over everything from the shelf when you pick them up to smell the flowers.



Figure 2: Cattley Irene Finney in six inch clay pot.

Despite their large size, I think that every grower should have at least one or two of these older larger hybrids in their collections. Their enticing fragrance and big, floppy flowers make them well worth the space they command. And don't forget, with their roots dating back to the mid to late nineteenth century, they are a bit of orchid history that we don't want to lose.

Sources: 1) Orchids by Hausermann <http://www.orchidsbyhausermann.com/>
2) Carmela Orchids <http://carmelaorchids.net>
3) Santa Barbara Orchid Estate <http://www.sborchid.com/>

Footnotes:

- 1) International Orchid Register
<http://apps.rhs.org.uk/horticulturaldatabase/orchidregister/orchidregister.asp>
- 2) Internet Orchid Species Photo Encyclopedia: <http://www.orchidspecies.com/indexjkl.htm#sec9>
- 3) Temperature Tolerant Orchids:
http://www.sborchid.com/sboe_collection.php?collection_genus=Cattleyas&collection_short_name=Cold%20Hardy&collection_name=Cold%20Hardy%20Cattleyas
- 4) Orchids by Hausermann, History: <http://www.orchidsbyhausermann.com/history.html>

*About the author: Bruce Adams has been growing orchids for 38 years, since he got his first Orchid, *Oncidium retermeyerianum* (now *Lophiaris lindenii*!) from Orchids by Hausermann. After ten years, he killed that plant and has been looking for another one ever since. His plants split their time between the great outdoors, and a cool greenhouse in the winter, as well as on the windowsill. He is also the author of the novel, *The Palace of Dreams*. His ideal life would consist of writing and growing orchids, while living in Hawaii with his lovely wife, Linda.*

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