

You Can Grow Oncidiums

Often referred to as 'Dancing Ladies' as the long racemes of many bright flowers bob about in the breeze. All orchid growers can grow Oncidiums as there are those that grow cool and out with the Cymbidiums through to those growers that do grow them with some adjustment to culture and also can flower the more difficult and exotic types. In this article we will endeavor to carry you through as a beginner who would like to grow an *Oncidium* or two to those that would like to tackle some of the more difficult types,

There are around 700 species mainly found in tropical America with a range of flower sizes and forms and shapes some with one or more flowers and those with over 100 flowers per raceme. They can have short inflorescences 8 to 10 cm. and also up to 3 to 4 metres long. The group contains Genera including Tolumnia (Equitant), Zelenkoa and Tricentrum (Mule Ear Types). Most of these are used extensively in Hybridising. The principal species used are *Onc. varicosum*, *Onc. crispum*, *Tol. triquetrum* (Equitant), *Onc. flexuosum*, *Onc. ornithorhynchum*, *Trt. lanceanum*, *Onc. tigrinum*, *Zel. onustum*, *Onc. forbesii*, *Onc. sphacelatum*, *Tol. variegata*. Most of these are grown by enthusiasts here in SA.

The types all vary in characteristics for example:

Onc. varicosum – has a semi rounded large labellum which is the dominant feature found in *Onc. varicosum var rogersii*. This is a larger more desirable species variety.

Zel. onustum - has a very distinct labellum with lobes or ears.

Onc. ornithorhynchum - masses of very small flowers.

Onc. sphacelatum - has upright to arching racemes with lots of flowers.

Onc. crispum – larger more rounded flowers with larger petals, dorsal and sepals.

Equitant types – Have many different colors with a lot of spotting and appealing flowers. Are very small plants with fan like semi terete type leaves.

Growing *Onc. flexuosum*

One of the most rewarding and easiest to grow is the species *Onc. flexuosum* and usually easy to flower when you find the right spot but always can grow profusely and soon becomes quite a large plant.

This species comes from Argentina to Brazil and is found in coastal mountains near inland creeks and marshes at high altitudes. It produces branching racemes with 10/15 flowers per branch and with several branches per inflorescence will result in over 100 flowers per inflorescence produced. Imagine 6 or seven racemes with over 100 flowers each. The flowers are about 20mm across. The large labellum is yellow with a brown saddle around the base.



This is the species that climbs upward and outwards as it grows, that is when it produces new bulbs, they have a long rhizome up to 50mm long that curves upward and if grown well will produce two bulbs per last year's bulb each season so that if you start with one, next year you have three the following year you will have seven and so on. It is not a good plant to grow in a pot because of this habit so is best grown on a mount. If you get a bulb or two from another grower or the trading table select a fairly large mount of cork or flat weathered timber. It needs to be at least 6 to 8 inches (200mm to 250 mm) wide to about 18 inches long (500mm/550mm). Mount the bulb at the centre bottom of the mount by placing it directly onto the material chosen, place a thin layer of sphagnum moss over the roots (not under) and then tie it to the mount with either fishing line or panty hose.

Draping 'Old Man's Beard' over the plant particularly the root area helps to maintain humidity and dampness around the area. Make sure that the mount has a good strong hook because when it becomes large it weights a lot and the plant can fall down and not only damage it but also those plants below.

As the new bulbs are produced, they tend to grow outward away from the mount and many aerial roots are produced, you can tie the bulbs back carefully to keep the plant neat and tidy and encourage the roots to attach to the mount. By hanging it above the *Cymbidiums* it will get the extra light and all-around air movement they love and will be regularly watered by the overhead sprinklers when you water your *Cymbidiums*. Regular fertilizing is most beneficial with most growers using the same regimen as their *Cymbidiums*. Before long you will have many rewarding inflorescences with lots of yellow flowers.

When the plant grows a couple of bulbs above the mount (4/5 years) a new mount can be added to the top of the old one and all can continue on or you can sever the plant at this point and start again. If you do not have one then give this very rewarding species a chance in your growing area.

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Oncidium varicosum



Oncidium flexuosum



Oncidium sphacelatum



Oncidium ornithorhynchum



Oncidium tigrinum



Oncidium forbesii



Zelenkoa onusta



Tolumnia variegata



Trt. lanceanum



Tolumnia triquetra



Onc. tigrinum

GROWING ONCIDIUMS



Oncidium sphacelatum

This species is found in Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. In Mexico this species is found in low hilly country at around 3,300 feet near the Gulf of Mexico. Mainly found growing on trees as epiphytes but in Belize they are found growing on rocks as lithophytes.

The fragrant flowers of *Onc. sphacelatum* are approximately 30 mm across the widely spread petal tips of the flower and are bright yellow with dark brown/ reddish blotches from the base to three quarters of the sepals and petals and a red/brown band across the labellum. All segments have wavy margins with the labellum having a white callus which extends to the base of the labellum.

The inflorescence is around 1500 long usually erect with the top third slightly arching which arises from the base of the newest pseudo-bulb and develops many small branches of flowers about 150 mm in length. This species grows to a fairly large plant in a short few years because it can produce 2 new bulbs from last years.

The plant is about 500 to 750 mm in height.

Grown out in a normal shade-house with *Cymbidiums* it performs better with a little extra light. An 8 inch pot hanging on one of those pot holders is ideal which gives it the extra light and also all around strong air movement which is essential. They perform best with the annual temperature ranging from 30/35° C with regular misting to keep the leaf temperature down on very hot days to 5/8° C at night avoiding frosts. Humidity should be kept as high as possible. Watering from overhead when the *Cymbidiums* are watered is ideal and just like that Genus more water when in active growth reducing if possible when bulbs are near maturity. Fertilizing with a balanced fertilizer or your normal Grow and Bloom type products is suitable.

A mix of medium bark with diatomite, Perlite or chopped Sphagnum Moss about ¼ volume is an ideal compost for this Genus and need to be re-potted at a maximum of three years. Once established you can get 4/6 racemes of flowers each season which is very spectacular. It is a long lasting flower but does lose the lower flowers before the last buds at the top are open. Get one of these in your collection, you will be very pleased with the results.