



"Cymbidiums have long stems with lots of flowers which make them great cut flowers. They are an arrangement in their own right and have long vase life – often up to 4 weeks although it varies from cultivar to cultivar," explains Peter Moffatt of Kiwi Orchids.

Breeding Cymbidiums takes more than just talent and luck. Passion is probably the most important ingredient when creating those dramatic x-factor lips or delicate pastels that the customers crave.

By Kirsten Rødsgaard-Mathiesen, Nelson, New Zealand

Down Under in sunny Nelson, at the top of New Zealand's South Island, Peter Moffatt of Kiwi Orchids is proudly showing some of the many new varieties of Cymbidiums he has bred. His eyes light up and he speaks in eager tones when naming varieties like Bronze Tiger. In fact,

naming a new variety is part of the fun for Peter Moffatt, and often the name does not hit him till the very end of the process when he photographs the flowers.

"You shouldn't think about a name – it should just come to you! All our recordings are computerized and each flower has to have something that will follow it through and as opposed to a number, I name my Cymbidiums. Others work with numbers but to me it is a memory job – it is about recognition and a name triggers my memory," says Peter Moffatt as he walks towards one of his latest creations: "Just the other day it struck me: Pink Ice. Another one is Lolly, it reminds me of the colour of candy or bubble gum."

Peter Moffatt's business partner, Grant Fergusson, comes up with ideas for names as well but in the last 20 years he has not named a single flower. It seems to always

be Peter's suggestions that work.

Con amore

Prior to Peter Moffatt even considering a name lies years of hard work not to mention patience and money. "I don't like to put a figure on it; if we did we probably wouldn't do what we do. It is a labour of love!" Typically it takes them up to ten years to develop a new variety that not only has to have the X-factor, it also has to be a good quality, long-lasting commercial type flower with strong stems and productivity.

Cymbidiums have not been available to the Western world till recently, in fact in their natural habitat they are "quite insignificant little things" says Peter Moffatt. "If you compare the hybrids of today with what people were collecting a hundred years ago, you'd hardly see that they were the same thing. Only recently



Kiwi Orchids is the only Cymbidium grower in New Zealand to use a conveyor belt when grading their cut flowers bound for the Japanese market.

have they become a good floricultural crop, and it is only in recent years breeders have developed the really nice shapes, colours and sizes and the numbers of flowers on the stem.”

When it comes to breeding new varieties in New Zealand, Kiwi Orchids is at the top end of the market. The chairman of New Zealand Export Growers Orchid Association (NZEGO), Lars Larsen, says: “New Zealand has 120-130 Cymbidium-growers, of those about 70-80 are members of NZEGO. In theory any one can breed but only very few do, and Kiwi Orchids is one of the very few companies that has turned breeding into a profitable business. They are the leading company here.”

The Dutch connection

Kiwi Orchids is also highly regarded in Holland where they sell their new varieties. The last 15-20 years they have worked with the same consultant, Wim van der Ende, who is also the consultant for introducing the new varieties to the Dutch growers. They promote new varieties through their website and their catalogue, and by growing some varieties in Holland at the Berkel Nursery of Aad de Koning for the growers there to see. “Our strength has very much been producing new and earlier varieties. In Holland many of the varieties that flower in the first part

of the season, when the prices are at their highest, have been developed by us.” One may wonder why the Dutch are not doing all this work themselves, but according to Peter Moffatt it is all about money.

“There is a big cost involved in growing on seedlings. You may have to grow 1,000 seedlings of a new cross to only find one, or none that will be better than the two parents that started it. It is very expensive to bring all those through. But our growing and labour costs in New Zealand have been cheaper than in Holland, so the Dutch are quite happy to let some one else do it and then pay a reasonable price for new clones once they have been trialed and proven,” explains Moffatt and his partner elaborates: “But you have to have a passion for it – you have to really want to do it. Not all growers have that by far. The Dutch are looking outside their own nurseries for new varieties and here in the South Pacific they see orchids growing in greenhouses the way they grow them themselves. Not to mention some one like Peter that has enthusiasm and passion. Basically it is a marketing thing; they see something new and different.”

The important X-factor

And “new” is vital! According to Peter Moffatt sticking to “the old and known” is

no longer the thing to do. “We have to change to survive and keep the customers interested. If Cymbidium growers don’t advance and introduce these new varieties they will be left behind. Their competition is not just other Cymbidium growers; the competition is other flower growers in general. So we are having to produce these new varieties to keep ourselves in front.” In more recent times the X-factor has also become an important part of the equation. “Appeal is everything. You have to develop lips and petals in combinations of shape and colour that say wow!”

The latest trend in Cymbidium is more dramatic flowers, like Bronze Tiger, and in particular flowers with a strong banded lip such as Talk About Pink. Another specialty is to develop pure colours, green or white, with no red markings at all. This has become a niche market for Kiwi Orchids with varieties such as Kiwi Paradise Martin. “Third and equally important is the delicate pretty, beautiful flower; particularly in the pastel coloured areas. They are very feminine, traditionally a wedding flower and very popular in Japan, whereas particularly Germany, Switzerland and Italy want the strong colours, the dramatic flowers. Millions of stems are sold in those markets.”

Green is in

White is traditionally a “big colour”, but now the fashion trend in the USA is more towards green and yellow. “When we first came into this game, 25 years ago, it was pink and white; green was hardly wanted partly because the green colours back then were dirty, muddy, brownish sort of greens. Today’s green is clearer, cleaner and brighter,” says Moffatt and stresses that in fact it is hard to find green flowers of any genera apart from Cymbidiums. It seems green is now being discovered as Grant Fergusson explains: “We are exporting our flowers into the Northern Hemisphere during their summer months. Green is a cool colour and therefore it has an appeal to the European and Japanese markets at



Developing pure colour varieties, e.g. Kiwi Paradise Martin, with no red markings at all is a niche market.

that time of the year. This is also the age of green; everything has to be environmentally friendly, which also plays a big part in the popularity of green flower

arrangements.”

Not only the green ones but in general Cymbidiums are becoming more popular as a cut flower in the Western World. In the USA Cymbidiums have become quite popular as a domestic flower. Orchids have always been expensive and exclusive but with a vase life of up to four weeks they are now “value for money”. “Rather than in the past when orchids were thought of as a single flower, a stem of Cymbidiums is a whole arrangement in itself. And that’s where the growth is coming from; people have realised that orchids are no longer just a ceremonial flower, they are for every day use.”

Number one in Japan

Unlike most orchid producers in New Zealand Kiwi Orchids has two parts to their business. Other than being the most serious breeder of new Cymbidium varieties they also grow cut flowers for the Japanese market. “We only use one importer in Japan, Jalux Inc., and they take everything we can produce and on a fixed price.

Luckily for us they are the best flower importers in Japan.” Kiwi Orchids is often asked if it isn’t “risky” relying on one major client only, but they see it quite differently. “It is like a marriage; we are important to each other. It is our strength that we are specialised in catering to the Japanese market, and that’s why our brand is the number one Cymbidium brand in Japan. If within this organization we also tried to do the American market, we’re not going to be concentrating on what we do best. And we are more interested in being the best than the biggest,” says Grant Fergusson.

In fact they are “quite comfortable” with the size of their business as they find it to be “a good manageable size for cut flowers”, however they are aware that growth is also important for a company to thrive. “Our growth in the last few years has come from developing the other side of the business – the new varieties,” says Moffatt before returning to the green house to photograph Sweetie, a soft pastel-coloured flower perfect for the Japanese market. ■