

## AN ORCHID SITUATION IN 1997

**A**s you are reading this, a small team of gardeners from the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin is winging its way home from Belize in America. Travelling with the group in the jet's passenger cabin - if all went according to plan is a number of big cotton bags stuffed with live orchid specimens.

"I hate to have my specimens away from me at any time," explained the expedition leader, a few days before embarking on the trip. Brendan Sayers, who was appointed orchid gardener at Glasnevin three years ago, has been rebuilding the gardens' once famous collection - hence his destination.

During the last century and for the first part of this one, orchids were among the pet plants of two consecutive directors, David Moore and his son Frederick. And in the 1840s, for the first time anywhere in horticulture, orchids were grown from seed and brought to flower at Glasnevin, a great advance in the cultivation of this complex and mysterious family.

Frederick Moore retired in 1922, leaving about 2,000 different kinds of Orchidaceae species and hybrids at Glasnevin. By the time Brendan Sayers took over responsibility for the orchids in 1994, this number had dwindled to about 250 different species and hybrids.



Brendan Sayers

Rebuilding and restoring the collection has proved an arduous and time consuming task. The process of assessing the existing cache of plants is dependent on waiting for each orchid to produce its blooms, as "over the years the labels have got mixed up. I can't trust any label until I've verified the flower," Brendan said.

Not counting those flying to Ireland at this moment, Glasnevin's orchid numbers have now increased by another 150 species and hybrids: some bought in as seedlings, others acquired through exchanges. But the bulk of the new population arrived last year when Brendan and fellow gardener, Noleen Smyth - and Brendan's companion, Ger Doyle - made their first trip to Belize.

They carried back with them about 60 different live species collected from the wild. Dried specimens for the herbarium, on the other hand, made their own way on a Fyffes banana boat.

"When I looked at Belize I discovered its orchid flora today comprises 278 species - which I could comfortably hold here if we were ever fortunate enough to have them all," Brendan said. "And it would allow us to have a good collection of certain genera - such as *Maxillaria* and *Pleurothallis* - so people could come here to study them."

*Pleurothallis grobyi*, a dainty tree dwelling (epiphytic) orchid, was among the smallest collected last year. The tiniest were the *Platystele* species, with pinhead sized flowers, amazingly perfect in all their parts. These and the other small species now live in "the pits" at the Botanic Gardens, a range of behind the scenes glass houses. Inside the pits, vulnerable plants are further mollycoddled inside marine ply growing frames, in which they enjoy an extra humid atmosphere.

Some of the larger Belizian specimens are on display in the Orchid House: among them *Oncidiuni ascendens*, its in multi bloomed, lemon yellow and toffee brown racemes being humbled by fat orange bottomed bees, and *Gongora unicolor*, its pinky brown, strappy blossoms supposedly smelling "of chocolate covered tortilla".





*The rare old days*

many of the orchids are also found, so "when we walked though any area that we thought would have snakes, we sang". The entire Blondie catalogue proved an effective snake deterrent.

And so, despite the heat, humidity and animal life, last year's team and its precious cargo came back safe and sound: "Nobody got injured and nobody got malaria". Let's hope that this year's trip was equally successful, another step towards reinstating Glasnevin's orchid collection to its former international glory. ■

JANE POWERS  
The Irish Times  
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Humidity is essential to these tropical beauties from Belize where, even in the dry season, heavy mists descend at night. During the day the temperature can rise to 100° Fahrenheit, creating stifling Turkish bath conditions, an uncomfortable business for travellers from temperate Ireland.

And the heat is only one of the hazards faced by the orchid collectors; plants of the *Myrmecophila* genus support entire colonies of vicious, black ants. In one of those curious plant animal bargains brokered by Mother Nature, the orchids secrete a sticky ant food, and in return the ants aggressively protect their syrup factory, rushing out and attacking any visitor, be it a questing caterpillar or a prodding Irish finger.

There are other dangerous animals about: panthers, jaguars, and great slithery snakes. In the dry season these latter congregate by the rivers, where

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The current issue begins a new regular series - Members Plants - for you to show your plants in bloom.

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## ON THE COVER

*Prosthechea cochleata*, formerly known as *Encyclia cochleata*, *Anacheilium cochleatum*, and *Epidendrum cochleatum* and commonly referred to as the clamshell orchid or cockleshell orchid, is an epiphytic, sympodial New World orchid native to Central America, the West Indies, Colombia, Venezuela, and southern Florida.

Each oblong discoid pseudobulb bears one or two linear nonsucculent leaves. The flowers are unusual in that though the labellum is usually below the column in the members of *Prosthechea* the labellum forms a "hood" over the column. This makes the flower effectively upside down, or non-resupinate. Whereas the species usually has one anther, *Prosthechea cochleata* var. *triandra* is an endangered variety that has three anthers and is autogamous, allowing its existence in Florida where no appropriate pollinators appear to be present.

*Prosthechea cochleata* is the national flower of Belize, where it is known as the 'Black orchid.'