

Cymbidium

While still a major part of many orchid collections in California, over the past 10-15 years we have seen fewer Cymbidiums in the northeast, both on the plant table at the monthly meetings, and in the local shows. This is a shame, since they are quite easy to grow (when you know what to do), and offer several attractive features:



- Flowers last 6-8 weeks. On multi-spike plants, the blooming period can be 10-12 weeks or more. I have a couple of plants, which carry blooms for 4+ months each year.
- They are available in a broad range of colors.



- And, a few are fragrant.

While many species are epiphytes, others are true terrestrials. **Standard Cymbidium hybrids** are best treated as cool growing terrestrial plants, which require **high light, heavy feeding and lots of water**.

- Lois Duffin used 20% shade cloth.
- Waldor uses old 30-35% shade cloth during outdoor season (it probably provides no more than about 20% shading now).
- I grow these outdoors from late April¹, till the first frost is forecast (can be anywhere from mid October to mid December), and **in full sun**. If you are not concerned about the occasional light leaf sunburn, full sun is highly recommended.

I try to move my plants out on the first of 2-3 days with overcast weather; this minimizes the sunburn. If you wait till May, harden the plants in light shades for a week before moving them into full sun.

When growing in full sun, you have to water a lot. Cymbidiums are terrestrials, so **they should not be allowed to go dry**.

⁽¹⁾ = I know of one PA grower, who brings Cymbidium out on milder days in March (and back inside at night as needed).

The foliage is a good indicator of whether the plants are getting enough light. Foliage should be yellowish green. If the leaves are green, *they are not getting enough light*.

My dad used a plain sphagnum/bark mix for Cymbidium. I use a light terrestrial mix. My traditional primary ingredient (chunky peat, in 1/2"-2" nuggets) is no longer available in the US, so I have had to modify the recipe. I now use:

- 3 parts mulch (*preferably cedar*)
- 2 parts composted manure
- 1 part bark
- 1 part perlite
- 1 part Aliflor or LECA nuggets (*very large plants only*)

You can also mix in leaf mulch & similar organic materials. The new mix holds less water than the one based on chunky peat. During the outdoors season, I water with a sprinkler 3 times a week, 2-3 hours each time.

- Since Cymbidium can easily split liners and standard plastic pots, I recommend the heavy 'rubberized' pots used for trees & bushes (you can probably get these used from a local garden center or landscaper).



- You should repot every 2-3 years. As the plants grow in all directions, the new pot should have at least 2" of clearance all the way around.

- Once the plants reach a certain size, due to their heavy roots, it can be difficult to seat the plant in the new pot without getting the plant too high in the new pot.

It is OK to cut the bottom 1/3 of the root ball off with a clean razorblade. I know, it hurts me too, but it can be necessary.



- To avoid plants becoming too large and unmanageable, I recommend dividing hard at least every other time you repot. *I actually divide some of my plants every time I repot.*

In addition to the manure in the mix, we:

- ◆ Add a small handful of NutraCote to each pot in the spring (1-3 Tbsp, depending upon pot size).
- ◆ Water with full strength fertilizer every 2 weeks from March through November, and 1/2 strength during the winter.

The only 'difficult' part to growing Cymbidiums, is how to care for them during the 4-5 months they cannot be grown in the garden. There are several solutions for those who do not have greenhouse space available:

- A '3 season' porch, taking plant inside only during periods of hard frost.
- A cooler bedroom window.
- In a garage with windows.
- Under lights in a cool basement corner.
- Outdoors in a hole in the ground!

If you build a cold frame, that is 5-6' deep, and install a couple of 100W lamps in the bottom to provide a little bit of heat during the nights, you can winter Cymbidiums outdoors. While 40-45°F is preferable as minimum temperature, they do tolerate temperatures down to 32°F, and at 5-6' feet depth the temperature is 50°F.

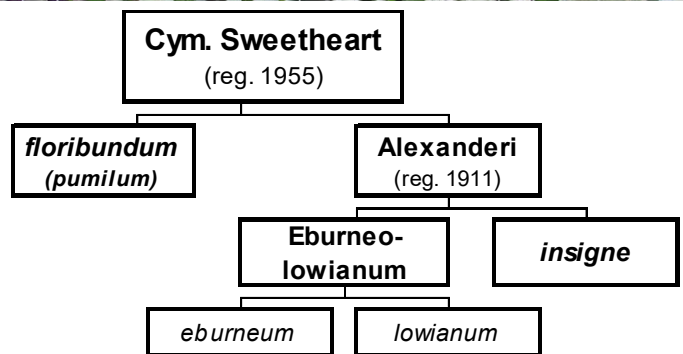
Re A-D: While Cymbidiums prefer cool nights, the daytime temperature is less important (as long as it is not high and dry heat).

The size of some of the 'standard' plants can be daunting (30-48" tall foliage, and the plant in a 12" tall pot), but there are both small and mid-size plants available in this genus. Cymbidiums can be broadly grouped into several categories:

Standard plants

These may have large or small flowers (so called 'miniatures', which refers strictly to the flower size, not the plant size). Flower spikes can be upright or arching, and carry 8-25 flowers. Arching spikes are frequently staked to appear upright.

Some 50-60 years ago, many hybrids were made between complex hybrids and *Cym. floribundum* (syn. *pumilum*), which produced compact plants with a lot of flowers on the spikes (true miniatures, in comparison with the standard hybrids). These are rarely seen today, but can be found at SBOE and a few other CA nurseries.



Some of the more rewarding species behind the hybrids are *Cymb erythrostylum*, *insigne*, *lowianum* (arching spike, a few are fragrant) & *tracyanum* (very fragrant).

While not used much in breeding, there are other species worth growing, such as *Cym. dayanum* (Nov/Dec blooms) and *Cym. aloifolium* (summer blooming).



Tabletop plants

With smaller bulbs and shorter foliage (18-20" or less), these can be grown on standard height tables or benches. Most of these are 'warmth tolerant', so they need little or no cooling off to initiate buds.

Flowers are small to mid size (about 3½"), and usually more open than standard hybrids. Typical flower count is 4-10 per spike, though recent breeding has produced up to 15 flower/inflorescence for (Yai x Donovan, photo below).

The smallest of these bloom in 3½" pots. For stability, I prefer to use 4" or 6" pots (depending upon the actual plant size).

While yellow flowers dominated originally, both whites, pinks and reds have appeared in recent years. In Hawaii these plants are grown in bark or bark/perlite, in NJ I use my terrestrial mix.



- There are some primary hybrids around, though most are rarely seen:



Cym. Frosty Jack 'Fair Orchids'
(*mastersii* x *erythrostylum*)

Cym. Akaka Falls
(*dayanum* x *tracyanum*)

Novelty Cymbidiums

- Some are simply new color forms or patterns, such as standard flowers with spots.
Cym Dosido 'Freckleface' HCC/AOS is shown here.
- In CA there has been considerable breeding with **peloric flowers** (both petal peloric, sepal peloric & 'other').



- '**Others**' are based on breeding with *Cym. madidum* or *Cym. canaliculatum*, which produce a huge number of small flowers. Shown here are *Cym. Dancing Mother* (madidum hybrid) to the left, and to the right *Cym. (canaliculatum* x Malpaso Creek).



Pendulous Cymbidiums

Most stem from hybridizing with *Cymb devonianum*, though *canaliculatum* and *madidum* have also been used. These hybrids often have somewhat broader foliage, and their spikes hang almost straight down. While still cool growing, they tend to want slightly higher minimum temperatures than standard hybrids. The better clones² set two spikes from each blooming size lead, which can produce an incredible display on mature plants.

These plants do fine in the basic terrestrial mix. I recommend keeping devonianum hybrids indoors a couple of weeks longer than the standard types, and hardening for a week prior to placing them in full sun.

(²) = **Cym. Dorothy Stockstill 'Forgotten Fruit' AM/AOS** can produce 4 spikes from each blooming size lead.



Left: **Cym. Drew's Delight 'Maplewood'**

Center: **Cym. Gala Odyssey**

Right: **Cym. Touchstone 'Mahogany' HCC/AOS**

The pendulous Cymbidiums are rarely seen, as they are hard to transport in bud or bloom. However, with a little ingenuity, it is certainly possible (see page 4).

Chinese Cymbidiums

Cym. ensifolium, *goeringii*, *kanran* & *sinense*. These fragrant species:

- Do not tolerate full sun.
- Should be protected against extreme cold. They can go outside in summer, once night time temperatures exceed 50°F.

These species have long roots, and are typically grown in extra deep pots. Similar to the rest of the genus, do not let them dry out between waterings. For me, both *ensifolium* & *sinense* respond better to growing in a sphagnum/bark mix, than the terrestrial mix.

***Cym Memoria Amelia Earhardt 'Scott Valine'* HCC/AOS**
best in show at SEPOS in 2018:



This plant travelled to the show hanging from a chain, suspended under the roof of my van.

While Cymbidiums can appear difficult to transport, there are solutions.

Standard Cymbidiums can be placed in a box, that is then filled with packing material to prevent the plant from falling over. Alternatively, it can be placed on a piece of plywood (= platform), 12-18" square, and with wooden blocks in the corners. Screw hooks into the blocks, and you can run bungee cords across the plant to hold it firmly to the platform. It will now stand firmly in the back of your vehicle.

Other solutions:

Cym. Fashion Runway 'Akhtar'

Pendulous spikes, 42-48" long,
with up to 45 flowers, 3"-3½" NS.



This plant travels to orchid shows on top of an inverted bucket, which stands on the passenger seat of my van, on top of a soft blanket.

The plant is strapped to the headrest with a bungee cord. The flower spikes are draped down to the floor, on top of the blanket.