

Orchid of the Month for September, 2014

Pleurothallis cardiothallis 'Charlotte'

by Bruce Adams



Figure 1: *Pleurothallis cardiothallis* 'Charlotte'

I remember once hearing the late, great Joan Rivers say, “The eleventh commandment: never pay retail!” With that in mind, I present to you this orchid of the month. I attended the Pacific Orchid Exposition (POE) in San Francisco last year, and as many of us do, proceeded right away to the plant sales area in the back. Presumably, an orchid show is about viewing the best of all the beautiful orchids grown by the best of all growers. But the truth is that it is really about getting an opportunity to buy even more plants! Yes, I’ll admit it. When I go to a show, I check out the vendors first. If there is not a vendor from whom I am interested in purchasing plants, then I am much less likely to attend.

The POE is one of the biggest annual orchid shows in the nation, and always has vendors from around the world. The last time I attended, nurseries from Malaysia, Ecuador and Columbia were present, as well as many from around the USA. This presents a great opportunity to acquire plants without having to pay shipping fees, or to worry about importing and dealing with all the red tape and hassle of trying to get plants from another

country. While this is certainly a bargain, the prices do reflect the cost of bringing all of those plants to the show. When I was a youth, working at Sea Breeze Orchids in Bayville, Long Island, the owner revealed a trade secret: often the prices of plants at a show are higher than they would be at the vendor's greenhouse, to offset the cost of attending the show. So there goes a significant portion of the so-called bargain.

But fret not, for there is one place where a bargain can always be found, as well as unusual plants that the other vendors probably don't have. This is the members' sale table, where members of the presenting society sell their own plants. Without the overhead, or the need to make a living off of their sales, they often ask ridiculously low prices for their plants. Thus, at the POE members' table, I found a beautiful, healthy plant of *Pleurothallis cardiothallis* for the unbelievable price of \$6.00. Needless to say, I grabbed the plant.

I had no idea what the flowers would look like, but the plant itself was beautiful even without blooms. *Pleurothallis cardiothallis* is of the group of *Pleurothallis* that has recently been transferred by Carl Luer into the new genus, *Acronia*. (1) Many of these plants have heart shaped leaves which are quite lovely, almost appearing (to me, at least) like an *Anthurium* leaf. The flowers emerge singly or in groups, at the cleft of the heart, and sit upon the upper surface of the leaf. Examples of these are *Pleurothallis marthae*, which has clusters of beautiful five-centimeter flowers of yellow and red, and *Pleurothallis teaguei*, with clusters of somewhat smaller nearly black and white flowers. (2) These are beautiful, breathtaking plants, with enormous, round dinner plate leaves of up to a foot in diameter in well-grown plants. Smaller varieties in this section include *Pleurothallis perijaensis*, and *Pleurothallis palliolata*.



Figure 2: *Pleurothallis palliolata*, in a four inch pot, with leaves about three to four inches long.

Although I love the large flowered varieties, I simply do not have room for the large plants that produce these flowers, so I have opted for the smaller species. In a four by six foot greenhouse, one *Pleurothallis marthae* can claim as much space as probably twenty or thirty (fifty?) smaller varieties. And frankly, I'd probably regularly bump into the leaves of a plant so big and ungainly. If, however, you have the room, by all means try one of the monster varieties. It will definitely impress your orchid friends!



Figure 3: *Pleurothallis cardiothallis*, close up.

The flower of *Pleurothallis cardiothallis* is small, yet beautiful. At about one half inch wide, it may require a magnifier to see well, although it is certainly not as small as those of some other species. The color can vary from pale yellow to deep maroon. I like the darker version better. When the light is just right, the flower has a translucent quality to it.



Figure 4: Pleurothallis cardiothallis back lit.

The habitat of many plants in the Pleurothallis tribe is that of the tropical cloud forest; a humid, wet, high altitude tropical forest, literally, “in the clouds”. (3) As the cloud settles onto the plants in the forest, water condenses on the leaves and roots, keeping the plant moist year round. Because of the high altitude and cloudy sky, the temperature is cool and the light relatively dim. It’s like a foggy day in San Francisco, where, by the way, Pleurothallis and its relatives grow quite well.

Culture for these plants is pretty straightforward. Most members of this genus, indeed most members of the Pleurothallis tribe, prefer high humidity, greater than 50% and preferably in the 70% range. While many can tolerate temperatures into the eighties and occasional nineties, they prefer daytime high temperatures to be below eighty degrees year round. Lower lighting is generally preferred. As you might guess with plants that like it humid, cool, and not too bright, Pleurothallis generally prefer to be kept moist. They hate to dry out, and if a plant goes bone dry, it often suffers terribly, or even dies. (4) That being said, I have had plants dry out and recover, but they didn’t look good for a while. If you have the humidity, Pleurothallis plants can be mounted and will do quite well. They enjoy the daily watering and good air circulation that mounting provides.

But my Pleurothallis cardiothallis is potted. In fact, I just repotted it today while writing this. The leaf stalks had reached the edge of the pot, and the roots had begun to grow over the edge, so I decided it was time. When I unpotted the plant, I saw that the mix had pretty much broken down; and yet the plant was thriving. I repotted in a mixture of small seedling size Orchiata with some larger pieces mixed in, to allow for drainage. High grade New Zealand sphagnum works well also. I placed the plant in a plastic pot with many drainage slots down the side, giving it just a bit of room to spare for the next few years’ growth, as the rhizome length between each growth is minimal in this species.

When you fertilize Pleurothallis and its relatives, once again, remember where these plants originate. With the fog and rain, they are receiving very pure water, and they are leached out on a regular basis. Thus it is wise to fertilize very weakly, maybe even at quarter strength. When I water I either use my reverse osmosis de-ionized (RODI) water, or at least give a quick leaching of the plant with RODI when I occasionally use tap water. This not only keeps the roots healthy, it prevents build up of salts on the leaves.

The culture of Pleurothallis orchids lends itself to a terrarium, as long as you can maintain good air circulation. The smaller species do especially well this way, and you can fit quite a few plants into a medium size terrarium without crowding. Orchidariums™ are especially good in this regard, but be careful, because they have a tendency to get very hot and dry if the surrounding air is too warm. I would recommend using the bottom level for Pleurothallids, and perhaps even disconnect one of the bulbs as well. I also find that lining the bottom with sphagnum moss, and keeping it moist, increases the humidity appreciably.

So why not go to your next orchid show, and before you see all the wonderful plants that the many nurseries have to offer, stop at the members' sale area to see what they have. You may get quite a good sale, and in so doing, obey the eleventh commandment. And don't forget to thank Joan Rivers for making us all laugh!

Footnotes:

- 1) The Pleurothallis Alliance web site, article on Acronia:
http://pleurothallids.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=95:pleurothallis-acronia&catid=39:currently-recognized-genera&Itemid=58
- 2) Internet Orchid Species Photo Encyclopedia <http://www.orchidspecies.com/>
- 3) Community Cloud Forest Conservation: Really interesting web site. Check it out!
http://www.cloudforestconservation.org/cloud_forest/
- 4) Orchid care tips: <http://www.orchid-care-tips.com/pleurothallis.html>

Sources:

- 1) Andy's Orchids: <http://www.andysorchids.com/>
- 2) Tropical Orchid Farm: <http://www.tropicalorchidfarm.com/>
- 3) Ecuagenera:
<http://www.ecuagenera.com/epages/whitelabel4.sf/?ObjectPath=/Shops/ecuagenera>
- 4) Many others: <http://orchidmall.com/plants.htm>

*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. 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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