

The Orchid of the Month for March: Coelogyne Unchained Melody By Bruce Adams



Figure 1: Coelogyne Unchained Melody. To the left you will notice a *Leptotes pohlitinocoi*, a nice little miniature in full bloom with six flowers.

(After a few months' hiatus, we are back with the orchid of the month. Now that spring is underway, I have, for a change, more orchids in bloom than I have time to write about, rather than the other way around.)

I will admit that I don't particularly like white flowers. When I go to orchid shows, I gloss over the big white *Phalaenopsis* that seem to be requisite at the top of every orchid display. Frankly, I find it rather boring and a waste of good display space! I grow orchids for their unusual color combinations and fantastic shapes, such as found in the pleurothallids and bulbophylums, and I find *Catasetum* and *Stanhopea* species to possess amazing flowers with true wow factor. But the reality is that I really cannot grow bulbo's or catasetums too well, pleuro's require a lot of attention in our climate, and I just don't have room for stanhopeas.

So this month, I turn my attention to a plant that I ordinarily would not have given a second look: *Coelogyne Unchained Melody*, a plant which I must have received as a raffle winning, or perhaps from a "fire" sale, at a plant show. *Coelogyne Unchained Melody* is a primary cross between *Coelogyne cristata* and *Coelogyne flaccida*. It blooms in the spring, with hanging spikes of five to ten white flowers with a slightly yellow to orange lip. There is a light fragrance, which is to me a bit reminiscent of daffodils. Apparently there is a variety *C. Unchained Melody 'Mossiae'*, which has been often sold in Australia as *Coelogyne mossiae*. But the two are not the same. *C. Unchained Melody 'Mossiae'* has a lighter, butter yellow lip, as compared to the original (3). I think that mine is the 'Mossiae' variety, as the lip of mine is very light. It doesn't really matter, except that the 'Mossiae' variety is supposed to be a bit less vigorous with fewer flowers.

The habitat of *C. cristata* is northeast India, Tibet, Nepal, and into China, at altitudes of up to about 8000 feet (1), where it experiences moderately warm, wet, summers, and quite cool, drier winters (2). *C. flaccida* has a similar, somewhat overlapping habitat, extending into Vietnam and Thailand, living at altitudes of about 7500 feet. Both species regularly experience winter temperatures into the thirties. This gives us a hint as to the temperature tolerance of the hybrid *C. Unchained Melody*. This plant can easily be grown outdoors in

the Sacramento area, provided that it is somewhat protected from our winter rains and scorching summer sun.

Growing orchids, or any plants for that matter, is a cycle. The habitat at which the parent species of *C. Unchained Melody* grow provides for a monsoon-type weather cycle; wet in the summer, and much drier (but not totally dry) in the winter. So, for no particular reason, let's begin describing my cultural practice in the early winter. After a long hot, Sacramento summer, once it appears that we are entering our colder, wetter, winters – notwithstanding the current drought – I bring my *Coelogyne* plant under the protection of the overhang of my house, so that it does not get wet during any winter rain that may come to pass, and stays a bit warmer than the exposed yard. I withhold water and fertilizer from about December to late February, but do allow for the occasional wind blown winter rain to wet the plant. Fortuitously, this mimics the winter rains of the parent species natural habitats, where about one half to two inches of rain tend to fall per month from December to May. Usually by February, the plant is setting flower spikes, one per new pseudobulb. At this point, in March, I bring the plant inside to enjoy. Once the flowers fade, a few weeks later, I place the plant at its summer location, under the shade of a privet tree. This provides early morning and late afternoon sun, perhaps a bit brighter than what my *Phalaenopsis* receive. In Nepal and Tiber, the monsoon season begins in summer, and plants receive a marked increase in rain, up to twelve inches per month by August. I mimic this by misting heavily during that time, along with twice weekly watering. The plant tends to stay quite wet.

Of course, I would like to feed regularly, but I always add a bit of slow release (three month) fertilizer for summer, to account for my somewhat erratic feeding schedule. I don't use anything special; just your basic Osmocote 14/14/14. It does the trick for me. Potting is in sphagnum moss, which I replace every two years, or when the plant outgrows the pot, if this comes sooner. This is a very forgiving plant when it comes to media, and I have not had any problem with root rot.



Figure 2: Coelogyne Unchained Melody

The plant is a vigorous grower, and each new lead often produces two growths the next year, achieving a nice large floriferous plant in a short time. So, the reality is that this is an extremely easy plant to grow, requiring no particularly special care, which can tolerate abuse, neglect, and our Sacramento climate year round. Not a major wow plant, but pretty enough, and giving a great reward-to-care ratio, while taking up none of my precious 24 square feet of greenhouse space. And it's a primary hybrid, which satisfies the species snob in me. Now that's the kind of orchid I like to grow!

Footnotes:

- 1) http://www.orchidculture.com/COD/FREE/Coel_Art.html
- 2) http://www.orchidculture.com/COD/FREE/Coel_Art.html

Sources:

- 1) Santa Barbara Orchid Estate: <http://www.sborchid.com/plantdisplay.php?ocode=COEL00018>
- 2) Cal-Orchid: <http://www.calorchid.com/miscellaneous-hybrids/coelogyne-unchained-melody>

*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 Hauserman. 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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