St. Augustine Orchid Society

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Seasonal Tips for Cymbidiums

Fertilizing Cymbidiums

July and August

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Cymbidiums are easy to grow in Florida but not so easy to bloom. To understand why we need to understand the natural habitat of the many of the species used to hybridize a lot of the common hybrids on the market. A lot of our most beautiful Cymbidiums species come from the Himalayan part of India. This part of India was formed when the tectonic plates under the Indian Ocean collided with the Asian subcontinent, uplifting the earth to form the Himalayan Mountains and their foothills.

The slope or foothills, called the “Back Water Sand” by the British is the habitat where we find many of the cymbidium species. The surface is uplifted ocean floor (remember the lime and seashell mix recommended last month). During the day, shore breezes send moist air up the slopes of the foothills into the mountains where it is cooled and comes back as moisture laden air in the evening as the shore breezes reverse. This fluctuation between mild (75 F) days and cool (55 F) moist nights in July and August is what the cymbidiums from this part of the world require to set the bloom spikes for the next season.

It soon becomes obvious that in northeast Florida we will never get a 20 degree F swing between 75 F and 55 F nights in July and August. It rarely gets below 85F! So how do we get cymbidiums to bloom?

- First, we choose cymbidiums that have been crossed with cymbidiums from other parts of South East Asia and Australia. These hybrids mute the hard temperature requirements enough, to get plants with the Himalayan Cymbidiums beauty but the tropical cymbidium heat requirements.
- Second we find a way to cools our plants in the early morning and late evening. My growing area has a mist system which comes on at 7 in the morning and 6:30 in the evening and stays on for 5 minutes each time. I only turn it off during periods of heavy rain. You can do the same thing with a hose, I just find that the automatic mist system is easier.
- The third thing I do is use pots with 1 inch water reservoirs in the bottom or set the pots in shallow pans*. This insures that the cymbidium is never without water.
- The fourth thing that helps with flowering comes from a commercial grower in Hawaii. Use high potassium fertilizer in late August. The potassium level should be at 250 to 300 ppm potassium (K) and zero to very low N. Do this only two times at a two week interval. Wait a month then resume your normal fertilizer schedule.

*Note about the pots with reservoirs or shallow pans: they produce mosquitoes that you may wish to control. I use a biological mosquito control *Bacillus thuringiensis* subspecies *israelensis*. You can buy it as Mosquito Dunks. I make 50 gallons of the stuff by putting two of the round pieces in an old sock with a ½ cup of corn meal and soaking the stuff for a week. I then pump a shot into each pot. You should not put the round piece directly into a mixer because it will release a lot of sawdust into your water and clog the mixer, soaking it in a sock prevents problems. I find that once a pot is ‘Inoculated” it maintains control for a long time. Be sure to follow all the safety precautions on the Mosquito dunk package (http://summitchemical.com/). It seems to control all the insects in a pot but I can’t prove it.