

Pleiones - Dreams, Memories and Reflections

I have admired Pleiones for about 25 years now; it seems an incredible length of time but even my limited powers of calculation says it must be so.

I first encountered these delightful plants, in of all places; the greenhouse attached to the rural science block of a Worcestershire school. The rural science teacher was one of the most relaxed and but at the same time enthusiastic people I have met. He was perfectly content to have boys of about 13 yrs old wield sharp knives in the greenhouse happily taking slices out of anything that looked if it might be propagatable in there. There was a small section that other teachers used and there I saw for the first time *Pleione formosana* and later in the year *Cyclamen hederifolium*. Strange that after all these years, two collections built and dispersed later that these remain my two favourite genera. The mystery of the plants was solved a few years later when I found that my history teacher was a very talented and well-known grower of alpines.

An enthusiasm for alpines ensued and my first *Pleione* was *Pleione pricei* (now *P. formosana* "Oriental Grace" or "Oriental Splendour"), purchased from Percy Picton's idiosyncratic but marvellous Midland nursery. I also bought *Pleione yunnanensis* (now *Pleione bulbocodioides* "Yunnan") in flower, vivid in colours of magenta passion and *Pleione limprichtii*. I bought an old copy of the RHS journal which had an article by Rev. Blakeway-Phillips about *Pleione pogonioides* (now aptly *Pleione speciosa* "Blakeway-Phillips") and was enchanted by the picture of this elegant and richly coloured orchid flowering in a pot carpeted with emerald green moss. At a price I think I finally tracked down a plant in flower and kept it on my bedroom windowsill. Alas I never persuaded the plants to flower again and moved on to *Dionysias* and such like, passing by the orchids after this disappointment. Alpine Garden Society shows were a source of inspiration to me at the time and I witnessed the arrival of the stunning Shantung hybrids on the show benches. I would have liked to have tried these exquisite plants, that seemed to lead the way for the rash of peach/apricot flowers developed within the alpine world by hybridising pink and yellow species. Unfortunately the Shantung hybrids were very expensive when they first appeared and so were well beyond the reach of my school boy purse.

About 12 years later, long after my original collection was run down while I left for university, I moved to my present address and discovered a greenhouse in the garden. My interest was rekindled. I visited a local nursery and asked for ideas for plants for my newfound "alpine house". The owner disappeared for a few minutes and returned with a plant of *P. formosana*. I was doubtful but took it. I think I then saw a segment within "Gardener's World" and discovered that my old *Pleione* world had been turned upside down. *P. yunnanensis* was no longer an explosion of colour, but a refined and delicate study in lavender pink, *Pleione forrestii* was a small bright yellow flowered species and *Pleione formosana* and *bulbocodioides* were swallowing up familiar names like a pair of horticultural Ghengis Khan's. And the hybrids had arrived with a vengeance.

I added *Pleione limprichtii* to my collection. I found it pleasant, it grows and flowers well but somehow did not "light my fire". Something about the intensity of the colour I think. I like plants that are either "pale and interesting", have a solid rich mid colour

or a deep colour. Compared to the other species and the hybrids it just does not match up, even though I find that hard to admit. I have noticed that I am starting to move slowly away from my alpine “roots” (yes, that pun was intended) changing my tastes to a set of criteria more aligned with the mainstream orchid world. However, I still admire the elegance of Pleiones and blanch at some of the monstrosities being created in the tropical orchid camp.

I was clearly ready for the hybrids. I found several suppliers and the excellent Pleione exchange hosted by Peter and started building a collection. I found some to be very similar to each other to my eyes, even different grexes. Indeed I learnt that different clones within a grex may vary more than plants of different grexes.

My favourites out of the 40 or so varieties I grow? In the “pale and interesting” corner we have P. Piton, a vastly underrated grex in my opinion. I have several clones, one with some yellow on the lip, and one almost identical to a plant of yunnanensis exhibited by Ian Butterfield. I love the long stems, the understated pastel colours and the fascinating flecks of darker colour on the petals. P. formosana “Clare” is a beautiful pure white with lemon yellow on the lip and a clear attraction for the local aphid population. I find it makes good fat pseudobulbs and flowers freely. This year I have splashed out on two more white formosana, “Red Spot” and the delicious “Kate”, can’t wait until spring. When I can flower it, P. x confusa is stunning. Large pale yellow flowers to die for but unfortunately I just don’t have the knack. I know that there are supposed to be good and bad forms but mine came from Eric Humphrey and I know he grows it brilliantly. Sorry Eric, I have kept them, but they are not flourishing. I have had more luck with Shantung, I have three clones, “Ridgeway”, “Maryfield clone” and “Muriel Haberd”. Either my powers of discrimination are failing me or there has been a mix up because I cannot tell them apart. Even so they are very attractive, pale yellow petals with a hint of pink and fine pale yellow lips with dark red markings.

In the medium solid colour category I can only think of one. I think it is P. el Pico “Kestrel”, very solid matt pink flowers, and a similar coloured lip with large red spots. Very simple, very nice.

There are plenty of plants within the rich deep coloured category. My test for distinguishing who the real stars are, is the length of the period of stunned silence when I tip out the pots in January and discover the plant’s verdict on my cultivation that season. One manages to have disasters regularly at all seasons. P. el Pico “Goldcrest” has managed to get itself eaten by a slug (this has only ever happened to one other plant, a Piton), fallen over in mid flower and get stem rot. I don’t think any other plant has had anything like as many misfortunes. But some how I can’t resist its cheeky stubby rich pink flowers, vibrantly spotted lip with white whiskers. Pleione speciosa “Blakeway-Phillips” still stands the test of time and holds its own against the hybrid onslaught, maintaining a poise and air of sophistication. The curve of the petals catches the imagination every time. For those explosions of intense colour I look to P. Stromboli “Fireball”, I am sure that there are some more spectacular Pleiones now but this one certainly meets my taste. Another exciting one is P. Tolima “Moorhen” which has a more unusual shape with a very wide lip.

Then there are the bicolours. The *Vesuvius grex* is a particular favourite. I have three clones, one from R.Kretz with mid pink petals and the deeper coloured “Phoenix” and “Linnet”. Soufriere tends to flower quite early in the main season, the clone I have is very vigorous with mid pink petals and a wide lemon yellow lip heavily blotched with blood red. My final selection is Irazu “Cheryl”. Curiously when I first flowered it I didn’t like it. Perhaps like fine wines and strange cheeses it is an acquired taste because this year I loved it. The colour is hard to define, mauve but with a hint of yellow, with a lip which is lemon yellow on the upper surface, but purple beneath.

My dreams? I think that would be to succeed with some of the species so far I have grown poorly like *P. bulbocodioides* “Yunnan” and *P. aurita*. The gift of being able to flower and increase *P. x confusa* would also be most welcome. But the biggest dream might be that when I depart these shores for Brazil that I am able to overcome my present cultural difficulties and in the heat and grime of Sao Paulo, where the bugs are of a size that can easily fight back, I finally build a collection I can be proud of. Further I dream that people will see the collection and that someone will fall in love with *Pleiones*, as I did so many years ago, and the story will start all over again.

Mark Griffiths , March 2000