



Marlborough
NURSERY

Growing Notes

Rhynchostylis gigantea

rink-oh-STY-lis jy-GAN-tee-ah

Rhynchostylis gigantea has definitely become a collector's item in recent years with ever more unusual color forms being introduced into the marketplace. The unmistakable spicy fragrance is consistent across this genus, whether the species blooms in the winter or summer. One species, *Rhy. retusa*, is referred to as the "fox tail" orchid because of its long tapering inflorescence. The inflorescence of *Rhynchostylis gigantea* is somewhat shorter, the actual length being determined by genetics and culture of the individual plant. There is something exotic and magical about walking into a winter greenhouse and encountering the warm fragrance of *Rhy. gigantea*. It leaves a lasting impression one looks forward to year after year.

This orchid prefers the warm humid climate of Southeast Asia and ranges from Hainan, China through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Viet Nam, Malaysia and into the Philippines. *Rhy. gigantea* was discovered in Burma (Myanmar) by Wallich and described as *Saccolabium giganteum* by Lindley in 1833. Ridley transferred it to *Rhynchostylis* in 1896 (*J. Linn. Soc., Bot.* 32: 356). Over the years there have been numerous varietal names applied to different color forms but they are all of horticultural use only. At this time, the Kew Monocot Checklist recognizes only two subspecies with *Rhynchostylis gigantea* subsp. *violacea* (Lindl.) Christenson, being endemic to the Philippines.

Although this is indeed a warm-growing orchid, it is tolerant of a wider range of light conditions than other Vandaceous orchids making it more accessible to hobbyists. We like to grow it less bright than our *Vanda*'s and *ascocendas*... about 2000-2500 foot candles is a good range if you are measuring. I have also seen some people growing *Rhy. gigantea* under lower light like a *Phalaenopsis*. The leaves will be a dark green but it does not seem to diminish flower production. Most growers in warm climates grow the species in empty teak baskets although some will put a few large chunks of charcoal to help anchor the plant. One grower I knew of years ago used weathered beef bones in a basket with his *Rhynchostylis* saying that they liked the calcium. This is an adaptable orchid however, and those living in drier temperate climates might do well using a large plastic pot with coarse bark mix. That being said, I recently saw two awarded *Rhy. gigantea* at a Florida orchid show that were being grown in large plastic pots of a peat-based "mud mix" that is usually used for *Phalaenopsis*. One main consideration with *Rhy. gigantea* is repotting, which can be challenging because of the very stiff, thick roots. Soaking them helps a little, but whatever potting approach you settle on should be chosen with longevity in mind.

That is why a wooden basket is popular because it is limited only by the life of the wood. The culture regimen fits within that of your other orchids; fertilize once a week during warm months and every other week in winter. You will need to adapt watering practice based upon potting. These orchids appreciate frequent watering but do not like to stay wet.

