

Australian Garden

Vol. 18 No. 5
May/June 2007

HISTORY

Exquisite epiphyllums

All about Albury



Painting colonial plants

Epiphyllum species and hybrids

Beverly Allen, the well-known Sydney botanical artist, was awarded a Gold Medal at the Royal Horticultural Society's January 2007 botanical art exhibition in London for a series of eight *Epiphyllum* species and hybrids. Beverly, who has pursued a career as a botanical artist since 1998, has shown annually at the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney *Botanica* Exhibition since 1999, *The Art of Botanical Illustration* at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne, since 2000 and exhibits regularly with the American Society of Botanical Artists in New York and Washington. Her work is held in private collections internationally as well as at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation and in The Shirley Sherwood Collection. **Colleen Morris** learns more.

Among botanical artists the Gold Medal of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) is a coveted award. Beverly Allen delights in the rigour of accurate botanical representation, exact colour reproduction and attention to detail, the criteria on which works are judged.

Artists must display at least eight pieces of work, which are primarily of botanical interest and at least life-size. The Gold Medal is more usually awarded to exhibits, which focus on a particular theme or plant family and the standard across all the illustrations must be consistent and outstanding. It is Beverly's choice of plant family and the origin of some of the specimens illustrated which is of special interest to garden historians.

The 2004 post conference tour visited a number of colonial gardens in the Camden area west of Sydney. The plants growing in these old gardens drew much attention and a botanical correspondence ensued, which was edited and published in *Australian Garden History*, Vol. 16 (4) pp. 18-20 at the precise time that Beverly was researching the subject of her RHS entry. The *Epiphyllum* spp. (or what we thought to be *Epiphyllum* spp.) had been a knock out, laying down the gauntlet to the roses, or indeed the orchids to prove just which is the 'queen' of flowers. It is little wonder that any number of the night flowering species are referred to as Queen of the Night or *belle de nuit*, a common name that is easily recognised but adds to the general confusion we have with correct identification of the plants of this family.

Beverly Allen prefers to paint plants that aren't common subjects. An enthusiast for the delicacy and complexity of the flowers of this family of plants, Beverly made the unusual choice to paint the *Epiphyllum* of our old gardens. 'They have been neglected and I love the contrast between the beautiful silky flowers and the tough, awkwardness of

their stems' she says. For more than a year, Beverly visited gardens during the crucial and short-lived flowering period, working at a steady but furious pace to capture colour, form and detail. *Epiphyllum hookeri* (syn. *E. Hookerii*, *Cactus phyllanthus*) bursts into bloom at about 11pm and senesces at dawn allowing little time to capture the minute detail required for botanical accuracy. To quote Margot Child who was involved with the inception of the annual *Botanica* exhibition and is Beverly's co-founder of the Florilegium Society at the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney, 'the degree of difficulty is eleven out of ten'.

Only a small number of botanical illustrators have captured the beauty of this particular species

When she embarked on painting these species Beverly had some insight into the challenge for her technical skills as a botanical illustrator but little did she envisage the complexities of identification and botanical nomenclature. She concentrated on locating species but this in itself was a challenge as *Epiphyllum* spp. readily hybridise. Looking at old illustrations and publications on Cactaceae indicates how difficult it can be to differentiate between species and a more than rudimentary knowledge of nomenclature changes is needed to explore historical images. Correct identifications were made when Beverly exhibited her work in London. Here, she had the benefit of advice from botanists at Kew and Nigel Taylor, one of the editors of the recently published *The New Cactus Lexicon* (David Hunt, Nigel Taylor and Graham Charles, 2006). This is the most scientifically authoritative compendium on the Cactaceae published since Britton and Rose's monograph of 1919-1923, one of the references Beverly used for her research on the species and hybrids she had discovered.



ABOVE: *Epiphyllum hookeri med.*, the illustration purchased by the RHS Lindley Library.

Illustration: Beverly Allen



LEFT: *Disocactus phyllanthoides*.

Illustration: Beverly Allen

Specimens Beverly painted include plants from Ellensville near Mt Hunter and Yaralla, Concord, two important old NSW gardens. I had observed both the species in these gardens in a number of old gardens, particularly the colonial gardens of the Camden and Campbelltown area. When these gardens were first established William Macarthur's famous Camden Park Nursery was nearby. Macarthur issued four printed catalogues of plants cultivated at Camden in 1843, 1845, 1850 and 1857, after which Francis Ferguson, a former employee of the nursery and with whom he maintained a good relationship, established a nursery and issued catalogues for his Australian Nursery at Camden. A new house at Ellensville was constructed in 1890 and Francis Ferguson, an old friend of the owner, designed the new garden. In 2004 we delighted in seeing both cream and red *Epiphyllum* [sic] clambering over and through an old *Tecomaria capensis* hedge, their twisted, flattened stems an unruly tangle, from which burst their gorgeous flowers.

The red flowered specimens from Ellensville and Yaralla proved to be *Disocactus ackermannii* (syn. *Phyllocactus Ackermannii*, *Epiphyllum ackermannii*, *Nopalxochia phyllanthoides*). It was collected in Mexico by a Mr Ackermann and introduced to England in 1829. The first flowering of the plant in England caused a sensation and coincided with a rise in the popularity of Cacti as collections among a select group of wealthy plant amateurs. It is often confused as a hybrid and has so perplexed botanists (let alone amateurs) over a correct identification that a paper, *The strange and curious tale of the true and false Epiphyllum Ackermannii (Cactaceae)* was published in the scholarly journal *Taxon* (Vol 38:11, 1989, pp.124-128). *Epiphyllum ackermannii* is listed in the Catalogues of plants cultivated at Camden for 1850 and 1857. Mid-nineteenth century illustrations of this species appear decorous rather than detailed.

It is very plausible that the majority of the red flowering *Disocactus ackermannii* we see growing in the old gardens of western Sydney originated from Camden Park although it was also available from Shepherd's Darling Nursery, Sydney and Michael Guilfoyle's Exotic Nursery, Double Bay in 1851. The extraordinarily delicate *Epiphyllum hookeri* is also listed in both the Camden Park and Darling Nursery catalogues by one of its former names, *Epiphyllum phyllanthus*.

Another of Beverly's subjects, the pink flowered *Disocactus phyllanthoides* which many growers know as *Epiphyllum* 'Deutsche Kaiserin', appears as *Epiphyllum phyllanthoides* in the Camden Catalogue and *Epiphyllum speciosum* in the Darling Nursery catalogue. But Alexander Macleay can be credited with the earliest known

introduction of this plant into the Elizabeth Bay House garden with his importation of *Cactus phyllanthoides* (yet another alternative name) from Loddiges in 1836. All three species discussed above are listed as growing in the Sydney Botanic Garden in 1857, along with another five *Epiphyllum*.

The lovely cream species at Ellensville and many old gardens is *Epiphyllum crenatum* (syn. *Phyllocactus crenatus*) but it seems it has not been grown in our gardens for as many decades as we might believe. By 1895 the Sydney Botanic Gardens Catalogue had an extensive list of Cactaceae, *Phyllocactus crenatus* was among them but it is not listed in earlier nineteenth century nursery catalogues. Another species painted in the series is *Epiphyllum oxypetalum* which I suspect is the *Phyllocactus grandiflorus* listed in the same 1895 Catalogue. A salmon flowering hybrid that many older gardeners recognize as being 'grown by their grandmothers', was identified as *E. crenatum* X *Disocactus* sp.

According to William Jackson Hooker's 1826 description in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* liii. t.2692(1826) *Epiphyllum hookeri* had been cultivated in British gardens since 1710 but rarely flowered 'and the few figures that do exist of it give no idea of the beauty and delicacy of the blossom'. The summer of 1826 was a fine, dry one and Glasgow Botanic Garden rejoiced at three blossoms on three consecutive nights between 8pm and 3-4am, enabling Hooker to produce the illustration that accompanied the text.

Today, photographs may convey the delicacy of these flowers but so often the minute detail is lacking. It is for this reason that botanical illustration at its best will not be surpassed. Only a small number of botanical illustrators have captured the beauty of this particular species and so it is not surprising that Brent Elliott of the Lindley Library chose to add Beverly Allen's *Epiphyllum hookeri* to its collection. The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew added *E. oxypetalum* and a painting of an apricot hybrid (*Selenicereus* X *Disocactus* X *Epiphyllum*) to their collection. A generous benefactor has donated Ellensville's *E. crenatum* to the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney.

Beverly may have completed her series but as she enthusiastically discussed looking for another publication in her quest for an accurate identification, she remarked, 'it draws you in, you get hooked'. Whether the botanical nomenclature will remain unaltered, I cannot tell but hooked, I could not agree more.

In 1996 Colleen Morris was commissioned to establish the Colonial Plants database for the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, a task she undertook with botanist Tony Rodd over a period of two years. HHT has since developed the database so it is available to all researchers at www.hht.net.au/research/kslrc