

WHY I GROW PITCAIRNIAS

(by *Bernard Stonor*)

Editorial comment (Bob Reilly) Reprinted, with permission of the Bromeliad Society International, from the Journal of The Bromeliad Society, 1974, volume XXIV(1), pp12-15. In this article, one of the West Australian pioneers of bromeliad growing, Bernard Stonor, discusses why he liked growing pitcairnas.

Well, why not grow them? This genus, for various reasons, has not attracted much interest or publicity and might therefore appeal to people who are looking for something a little different from all those familiar aechmeas, billbergias, and so on. Surely, in such a large genus, it would not be unreasonable to expect a number of fine plants and colourful flowers.

Information concerning the growing requirements of these plants is not as plentiful as one might wish; and, as is so often the case, the species which are described in articles are not obtainable. So we are faced with the interesting task of discovering their requirements for ourselves.

Nomenclature, too, is not always as accurate as it might be, although this can add interest to the culture of the genus; one never knows what fascinating plant may turn up, hiding under some pseudonym. Obviously, there is a lot to learn and some interesting discoveries to be made.

The first plant I acquired was labelled *Pitcairnia flammea* var. *pallida*. And by the way, I can never understand why, of some six varieties of *flammea*, var. *pallida* appears to be the only one grown in Australia. Maybe some of the others are here, but under different names. Anyway, the plant finally flowered and turned out to be *P. undulata*, an interesting if not exactly colourful species. A seedling of *undulata* flowered at the same time, which enabled me to identify the first plant. These plants were easy to grow and quite hardy, despite their somewhat soft leaves, needing only plenty of water and some feeding when growth was active to build up a flowering sized plant.

Another early arrival was *Pitcairnia andreana*, a small plant with attractive waxy foliage and a very showy inflorescence in yellow and orange. Here at any rate was one fine species. This variety proved a little more difficult to grow; clearly it is not as hardy as many of the others and although it is not deciduous, it does appear to have a dormant period during winter. At this stage watering may rot the plant. I am not sure there are any active roots to absorb the water in any case at this time of the year.

By now some of the characteristics of the genus were becoming evident, one of these being the long time taken for the petals to develop in the buds before the flower finally opens. The inflorescence seems to grow steadily at first with the buds appearing without any delay. Then there is a long spell during which nothing much seems to happen until finally the petals emerge and open. Fortunately, the sepals, sometimes the entire inflorescence, are usually colored as well as the petals, so the spike is attractive for a long period before the flower opens. The petals last three or four days before withering.

Pitcairnia flammea var. *pallida* finally arrived, a nice hardy plant, easy to grow, which soon flowered. While the white flowers may not be particularly ornamental, they do have one interesting feature not often found in bromeliads-they are scented. A further point of interest

was that the scent closely resembled that of the flowers of an olive tree which was flowering at the same time, So this species, too, proved worthwhile, for an unusual reason.

With so few plants available locally, there was only one way to increase my collection-grow them from seed. After a few not so successful attempts, the requirements for growing from seed soon began to sort themselves out. Fortunately, the seed, like most seed of the subfamily, remained viable for a long time, and I don't think any seed I obtained failed to germinate. The seed is very small and may take a long time to germinate, but sooner or later it will do so.

The seed was sown on top of a compost of coarse sand plus some leaf mold, and a clear plastic bag was placed over the pot. The seed was kept just moist until germination commenced by spraying when necessary. As soon as the leaves begin to appear it is better to remove the plastic bag, giving the seedlings plenty of air. Growth can be very slow in the case of most species, and the seedlings generally do much better if left in the original pot until they are a fair size. Even if they are quite large, I still prefer to leave transplanting until the spring and it is clear that growth is active.

As we might expect, not all the seed which we obtain is correctly named, and some interesting plants may appear. I must admit that I have never heard of many of the species being offered, so that is another point of interest, waiting to see what they are like. The first lot of seed I acquired included *Pitcairnia carinata*. This has proved to be a hardy, easily grown species with an all red inflorescence up to one meter high, colorful for a long time before the flowers finally open. A similar plant is labelled *Pitcairnia roezlii*, but this has yet to flower. Seeds labelled *P. heterophylla* have yielded seedlings with extremely long, narrow leaves. This species is more or less deciduous, very slow growing, with a small bulbous base; it is obviously not *heterophylla*. On the other hand, seed of the species *angustifolia* (?) has produced robust plants with unusually broad leaves. One never knows just what is going to come up. These seedlings have the usual grassy leaves, but they are almost devoid of scales. Some of the other seedlings I am growing also show this feature, while many other species are densely covered with white scales. It would be interesting to know whether these smooth-leaved plants are primitive types just beginning to evolve scales.

One of the most interesting species I have grown so far is *Pitcairnia mirabilis* var. *tucumana*. The name was enough to make me order seed; surely a plant with a name like that must be interesting, and var. *tucumana* suggests that it comes from the Tucuman hills, which I believe are in northern Argentina, so it should be hardy. Unlike most other species, the seed germinated quickly and the seedlings grew fast. The plants finally grew into strange affairs quite unlike any other *pitcairnia* I had seen. There is a large bulbous base with several tufts of *tillandsia*-like leaves sprouting from various points on top. These leaves are provided with small, innocent-looking thorns, but careless handling of these plants soon revealed the purpose of these spines. They are very sharp and penetrate one's fingers with ease, becoming detached from the leaf at the same time. This plant grows well in the open, taking sun, wind, rain, hail, anything that comes. While my plants have not yet flowered, I am told the petals are green.

Some time ago, I was given a small plant labelled "*Dyckia velascana*". It is a small species with rosettes of narrow, arching leaves about 8 cm in diameter. The leaf blades are about the same width throughout their length, do not have a sharp thorn at the tip, and bear rather soft spines, widely spaced. The plant flowered in the summer, a 20 cm high stem with three

yellow flowers. From the characteristics of the flowers I am sure this plant is a pitcairnia. The growth habit is very similar to that of *P. mirabilis*, tufts of narrow arching leaves on top of a large bulbous base. It is an attractive and interesting miniature plant, and I hope I can eventually find out its identity.

These are some of the reasons why I enjoy growing pitcairnias. They are full of surprises, there is a very large number of species to choose from, and they certainly add variety to a collection of bromeliads.-Margaret River, Western Australia.