

Ascocentrum ampullaceum

By Martin Motes

Sparkling Vibrant Flowers Crown a Charming Miniature Orchid

AMONG THE EARLIEST HARBINGERS of spring in our greenhouses are the clustered buds peaking from the leaf axils of *Ascocentrum ampullaceum*. The hyacinth-like spikes of amethyst flowers will start opening on the Indian varieties of the species in March and continue on the Burmese and Thai varieties into April and early May. Well-grown specimens can produce up to eight spikes so tall as to nearly eclipse the diminutive plant. Up to 4¾-inch (1.75 cm) full-formed flowers are carried on each spike. In most individuals the flowers are concolor lavender to deep amethyst with a sparkling texture which makes them glisten like jewels. *Ascocentrum ampullaceum* starts blooming on seedlings as small as 2½–3 inches (6.25–7.5 cm) and can be grown into impressive specimens in a small space. Plants of this species are ideal for windowsill or light culture.



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The plant architecture also is user-friendly for growers in temperate regions. Unlike most other species in the genus, which are high-light-requiring plants with narrow hard leaves, *Asctm. ampullaceum* has broad leaves that gather light more efficiently. Under high-light growing conditions, *Asctm. ampullaceum* produces numerous freckles of purple pigment in its leaves, indicating its need for more nutrients and water under bright conditions.

Ascocentrum ampullaceum was first described by William Roxburgh as *Aerides ampullacea* in 1814. John Lindley moved the species to the catchall genus *Saccolabium* and Rudolf Schlechter included it in his new genus *Ascocentrum*. The species has the widest range of all the ascocentrums of mainland Asia, ranging from Assam in the east through Nepal and Bhutan, across the northern Himalayas through Burma (Myanmar) to China and Laos. The species ranges south to Thailand and is reported from the Andaman Islands. One distinct botanical variety has been described, a superlative horticultural variety is widely cultivated and a white form exists. The distinct botanical variety, called *aurantiacum*, was described by Udai Pradhan from a plant collected in Munipore, India. The late Gunnar Seidenfaden suggested that this



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widespread and variable species might on further analysis harbor one or more distinct species yet to be described.

The horticulturally most desirable form of *Asctm. ampullaceum* is from Burma and Thailand. A plant from this population received a First Class Certificate from the Royal Horticultural Society under the varietal epithet *moulmeinese* in 1868. Happily, this superior variety of the species, which is slightly larger and much more robust, is the plant most widely available from sources in Thailand. The flower spikes are longer than the typical forms and the flowers larger and fuller. They are steadily being improved by selective breeding in Thailand. A white form has also been cloned and is widely available in the trade.

[1] *Ascocentrum ampullaceum* 'Crownfox Pink Glow', CCE-AM/AOS, illustrates the range of color in this vigorous free-flowering species. Grower: R.F. Orchids.

HYBRIDS One would imagine that a species with such outstanding characteristics would have an impressive history of hybridization. Alas, unlike *Ascocentrum curvifolium* and *Ascocentrum garayi*, *Asctm. ampullaceum* is a reluctant breeder. The intrageneric hybrids with *Asctm. curvifolium* (*Ascocentrum* Khem Thai) and *Asctm. garayi* (*Ascocentrum* Mona Church) are pleasant pot plants, but not clear-cut improvements on the parental species. The hybrid *Ascocenda* Pink Thing (*Asctm.*



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ampullaceum × Rose Siedel), produced by Barbara Wilkins, a pioneer breeder of ascendas, stirred sensation with its numerous dense spikes of intense vivid fuchsia flowers. This hybrid should serve as inspiration to breeders to coax these admirable qualities from the coy *Asctm. ampullaceum*.

Ascocentrum ampullaceum is more forth coming in mating with other genera. Among the most successful of intergeneric primary hybrids is *Rhynchocentrum* Lilac Blossom (*Rhy. coelestis* × *Asctm. ampullaceum*). A vigorous free-flowering hybrid, it produces numerous spikes of well-formed flowers in lavender to lilac to fuchsia. This compact hybrid captures the best qualities of both its parents. Equally successful, yet more compact, is *Ascofinetia* Cherry Blossom (*Neof. falcata* × *Asctm. ampullaceum*) that produces a profusion of pink (and, in some cases golden) flowers on a petite plant. In this hybrid, *Asctm. ampullaceum* frequently overcomes the propensity of *Neof. falcata* to dull color. The backcross of *Ascf.* Cherry Blossom to *Asctm. ampullaceum* — *Ascofinetia* Petite Bouquet — was also highly successful, garnering several AOS awards and a coveted Award of Distinction. The redoubling of *Asctm. ampullaceum* genes gives *Ascf.* Petite Bouquet much fuller inflorescences, with flowers that are more deeply colored.

Ascocentrum ampullaceum in all of its varieties is well worth cultivating. Its charming hybrids, though relatively few, carry its best qualities forward in vigorous, compact plants that can be grown under nearly any circumstances. These hybrids extend the delight of the species from spring to summer and beyond.



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[2] In clones selected primarily for color, as in *Asctm. ampullaceum* 'Crownfox Pink Glow', AM-CCE/AOS, the species' excellent form still shines through. Grower: R.F. Orchids.

[3] *Ascocentrum ampullaceum* 'Neptune', CCE/AOS, a white form, rare in the Aeridinae, occurs with some frequency in *Asctm. ampullaceum*. Grower: Silva Orchids.

[4] Even in temperate greenhouses and under lights, *Asctm. ampullaceum* can be grown into delightful specimens, as illustrated by this clone, 'Lauray', CCM/AOS. Grower: J. Becker

[5] *Ascocentrum ampullaceum* 'David's Delicious', AM/AOS, illustrates the near perfection of color and form that has been attained by selective breeding in Thailand. Grower: David L. Grove, PhD.



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- [6] A profusion of sprays and compact masses of vivid color make the grex *Ascocenda* Pink Thing (Rose Seidel × *Asctm. ampullaceum*) exceptional. The clone 'Ken Kone', HCC/AOS, is shown. Grower: Ken Kone.
- [7] *Rhynchozentrum* Lilac Blossom 'Denver Botanic Gardens', AM/AOS (*Rhy. coelestis* × *Asctm. ampullaceum*), brings together the best color qualities of both its parents. Grower: Denver Botanic Gardens.
- [8] The exceptional color, form and stem length of *Rhctm.* Lilac Blossom 'Mary Motes', AM/AOS, show this grex's

superlative qualities as a pot plant. Grower: Motes Orchids.

- [9] *Ascocentrum ampullaceum* contributes form and flower count to this delightful miniature, *Ascocenda* Baby Blue 'Leslie Slora', AM/AOS (*V. coerulescens* × *Asctm. ampullaceum*). Grower: Ellenberger's Orchid Eden.
- [10] *Ascocentrum ampullaceum* lends its depth of color and free-flowering habit to this successful hybrid, *Ascocinetia* Petite Bouquet 'Sunset Valley Orchids', CCM/AOS (*Cherry Blossom* × *Asctm. ampullaceum*). Grower: Fred W. Clarke.

Martin Motes, PhD, has bred hundreds of hybrids and received scores of American Orchid Society awards. His hybrids garnered gold, silver and bronze medals at the 18th World Orchid Conference in Dijon, France, where Vanda Mary Motes (Blue Grig × tessellata) won the trophy for Best Vanda in Show. He is an accredited AOS judge and author of three books and numerous articles. Motes, in collaboration with David Roberts, PhD, and Lauren Gardiner, PhD, of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, is working on a monograph of the genus Vanda. His wife, Mary Motes, is author of the memoir of Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Kosova, and the cult, best-selling comic novel Orchid Territory. 25000 Farmlife Road, Redland, Florida 33031 (email martinmotes@gmail.com).