Western Australian Terrestrials —*Thelymitra*

By Ron Heberle

Western Australia does not have the wealth of Epiphytic orchids that exist in the eastern states of the continent. It's wealth is in the terrestrial orchids which grow especially in the south west region of the state. Of all these species, four from the genus *Thelymitra* are described.

***Thelymitra variegata* (Lindl) F.Muell "The Queen of Sheba."**

Considered to be the most colourful of all Australian "Sun Orchids" reflecting a riot of colour combinations that can be blotched, speckled, banded or striped embracing all the colours of the spectrum, with an overall irridescent sheen that has to be seen to be believed.

Ron Kerr (A.O.R. Vol 48 No.1 March 1983.) stated "An anonymous genius dubbed this the "Queen of Sheba" and the name has stuck." The species is widely distributed throughout the West Australian coastal strip, at least from Dongarra in the north to Esperance in the east and extends inland into the eastern wheat belt, east of Katanning and at Tincurrin, A spread of some 600kms north to south and similarly west to east. Once common in the Perth metropolitan areas around the Swan River at Rivervale, South Perth, Como, Canning Bridge and elsewhere, some can still be found at Wanneroo and Jandakot.

The handsome "star" like flowers open only in warm sunlight are considered to have regular flowers, although most have a wider dorsal sepal and a narrower labellum segment. Plants can bear from one to seven flowers up to 4 cms. across. Basal flowers open first in rotation upwards but it is not unusual for all flowers to be open at the one time. Most colonies have similar colour combinations, but no two flowers are precisely the same. Occasionally strong colonies reflect a number of different colour combinations, to view one of these with all flowers fully expanded is a sight to be remembered.

Apart from colour, the species shares a number of unique features together with the allied species *T. spiralus* and *T. matthewsii*. The erect column, coloured blue or purple at the base and golden yellow above terminates with an elongated centre lobe extending forward and is flanked by the erect lateral lobes. There is an inconspicuous white toothed crest behind the lobes and a prominent rostellum that extends forward and above the large stigmatic plate. This is pressed hard against the centre lobe that splits from the base at maturity and exposes the pollinia. The rostellum is a positive device that prevents self pollination and also makes the removal of the pollinia difficult, this may explain why very few pollinated ovaries are observed in my experience and explains why the species, although widely distributed is reputed to be less abundant than most other species of the genus.

The spirally twisted narrow leaf (often corkscrew) is also shared by the two allied species and is quite unique within *Thelymitra*.

Plants have proved difficult to culture, will flower for 2 or 3 years, the non flowering leaves followed by tubers withering, in my experience.

Thelymitra variegata (Lindl) F. Muell "The Queen of Sheba".

***Thelymitra mucida*. R Fitz. "The Plum Sun."**

T. *mucida* was named and described by Robert Fitzgerald from a collection along the banks of Wilsons Inlet (some 50kms west of Albany) when he visited West Australia in 1881.

These swamp growing self pollinating, prune to blue and blueish pink species form a complex that shows differences in colour, striping and the cleft column, that can be split to the base and connate or be widely spread at the apex. The column is usually a different colour to the segments, vivid, glistening shades of blue or pink, the coarse, tangled, hairy tufts can also contrast. The mucine or bloom reflects the species name and covers the apex of the column lobes and behind and is a dense mass of tiny glistening sticky specks that look like miniature diamonds under magnification. All this

Thelymitra mucida R. Fitz. "The Plum Sun".

makes identification easy for this species, bearing in mind that some forms have two colour toned flowers in shades of blue, and pink sepalled and blue petalled plants and the reverse are seen.

The function and purpose of the unique bloom remains obscure and could be a worthy project for professional research.

The plants are easy to culture and survive for long periods in a pot, however self-pollination and short lived flowers have little potential for growers.

Thelymitra villosa Lind. "The Custard Sun".

***Thelymitra villosa* Lind. "The Custard Sun."**

This species was named by John Lindley in 1840 from a collection by James Drummond colonial botanist who was one of the original settlers when the Swan River Colony was established in 1829. During the next fifteen years Drummond sent Lindley and others approximately 60 species of W.A. terrestrials.

This colourful species is highly variable, not surprisingly as it has a spread from south of Geraldton to well east of Esperance and extends inland to three hundred plus Kms from the coast. The derivation of the species name is from the handsome dark green oval leaf that is covered with fine downy hairs on both sides "villose" (refer to Native Orchids of Australia David. L. Jones page 307). This leaf is quite unique and a positive identification feature.

The handsome and arresting multi flowered plants can bear up to 30 flowers 5cms across for the most robust specimens, and cover all shades of gold, yellow or lime green and be covered in varying degrees with brown to maroon speckles, spots or blotches, some are brilliantly coloured with heavy markings, others with just a few speckles or spots at the base of the sepals and others have no markings at all. The prominent fringe on the column is mostly yellow with white tips or can be all shades of brilliant orange.

Overall a very handsome plant but is difficult to keep flowering over a period of years.

***Thelymitra. canaliculata* R.Br. "The Blue Sun."**

This handsome multi flowered species was first recorded by Robert Brown, famous English botanist when as a member of Matthew Flinders expedition to map and explore the Australian coastline, he called at King Georges Sound (Albany) in December 1801. Brown with the assistance of Peter Goode and Ferdinand Baeur collected some 500 specimens of general flora mostly new to botanical science. *T. canaliculata* was one of thirteen terrestrial orchid species collected. (All can still be seen flowering in December as they did 191 years ago.)

The handsome blue flowers with dark striping are still common and abundant in the Albany region particularly after a previous summer fire and and have proved to be present north east of Perth and extending inland into the extremes of the agricultural areas arcing around to Augusta at the extreme corner of the southwest of the state and extending eastwards as far as Israelite Bay, over this huge area a number of forms are known with at least one that is more pink than blue.

The column is a positive means of identification bearing a half circle of coarse golden teeth at the rear apex with similar appendages in front and a pair of white hairy tufts attached to the upper edge of the column wings.

The species name is derived from the fleshy dark green ridged and channelled leaf. Plants do not culture well and are difficult to maintain under artificial conditions. ■

Thelymitra canaliculata R.Br. "The Blue Sun".