



R.L. Heberle

Thelymitra variegata

With pollen removed by unsuccessful insect.



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Thelymitra variegata

Showing the crest located at back of column.



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***Thelymitra variegata* from Albany, Western Australia.**



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Column detail of *Thelymitra variegata* from Gardner River, W.A.



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Thelymitra variegata from Capel, south of Bunbury, W.A.



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Thelymitra variegata
from Gardner River region, W.A.



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Thelymitra variegata
from Gardner River region, W.A.



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Thelymitra variegata and ***Thelymitra spiralis*** often grow together.

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

Ronald L. Heberle,

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The species is considered to be the most colourful of all Australian "Sun Orchids" reflecting a riot of colour combinations that can be blotched, speckled, striped or banded or just one colour embracing all the colours of the spectrum with an overall iridescent sheen which has to be seen to be believed.

Whilst there is some controversy about the botanical meaning of the species name, there are no problems with the common name, coined by an anonymous genius that linked the species with the legendary "Queen of Sheba" considered to be the most beautiful woman of her time.

The handsome "star" like flowers open only in warm sunlight is considered to have regular flowers although most have a wider dorsal sepal and a narrower labellum segment. Plants can bare from one to six flowers up to 4cms across. Basal flowers open in rotation upwards; it is not unusual for all flowers to be open at the one time.

Most colonies have a similar colour combination but no two flowers bare the same markings. Occasionally strong colonies have a number of different colours and markings, to view one of these with all flowers expanded is a sight to be remembered.

Apart from colour, the species shows a number of unique features together with the allied species *T.spiralis*, *T.apiculata* and the Eastern States species *T.matthewsii*. All have spirally twisted leaves (to the left) corkscrew or a slow spiral of two or three. There is a frilly spatula process at ground level from which the very narrow leaf arises.

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 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 pollinias.

The pollen is coherent, flaked and can be extruded, the rostellum is a positive device that prevents self pollination and also makes the removal of the pollen difficult, this may explain why very few fertilised ovaries are observed (in my experience) and could explain why the species though widely distributed is reputed to be less abundant than most other species of the genus.

The distribution is at least from Dongara in the north to east of Esperance throughout the coastal strip with recordings inland from east of Katanning, Tincurrin and with a recent find west of Kulin. A spread of 600kms north to south, and a similar spread west to east.

Once common in the Perth metropolitan area, around the Swan River, Rivervale, South Perth, Como, Canning Bridge and elsewhere, some can still be found at Wanneroo and Jandakot.

In my experience plants have been difficult to culture and flower for two or three years, then non-flowering leaves with tubers withering.

With the advances in culturing terrestrials, particularly in the Eastern States the above results would most certainly be improved on.

