



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

Understanding Your Plant Tag

March 2002

by Dr. Courtney Hackney, hackneau@comcast.net

[Orchid Growing Tips](#)

A is for apple, B is for boy. Does that sound familiar? Most of us have long forgotten that we started with the basics when we learned to read. Many new Orchid hobbyists must remember that it took them a long time to learn to read and accept that it will take awhile to learn the language of orchids. More advanced growers must try and recall how difficult the terminology of Orchids was in the beginning and not overwhelm new hobbyists with jargon. Orchid names may seem simple now, but only because we learned the language.

Species names are perhaps the most difficult, not just because they are derived from Latin and Greek roots, but because there are underlying conventions that go unspoken, but must be understood to appreciate the language of orchids. All living things in nature are identified by two names. When naming a species this binomial nomenclature is used, e.g. *Cattleya bicolor*. The first name is the genus and the second is the species, although they both are used to describe one kind of Orchid. There may be many different kinds of *Cattleyas*, but the combination of the two names is only applied to this one type of Orchid. There may be other species named *bicolor*, but they are in other genera, e.g. *Lycaste bicolor*.

Rules for naming orchids species are long and elaborate and usually accomplished by plant taxonomists. The first one to name a new species must describe the plant, place a dry specimen, in a plant museum (Herbarium), and publish the description. Often two different people will name the same new species using different names. The first published description is the one that takes precedence. Thus, *Cattleya warscewiczii* is the accepted name of the much easier to pronounce *Cattleya gigas*. They are the same species. Note that for a naturally occurring species the genus is always capitalized and the specific name always in lower case. For convenience and to save space, *Cattleya* is abbreviated *C*. There is a list of accepted abbreviations accepted by the RHS (Royal Horticultural Society).

Species often have more than one color form or growth form that are given varietal status. *Cattleya bicolor* var *brasiliensis* refers to a certain population of tall growing members of this species, while *C bicolor alba* designates a plant with green flowers and a white lip no matter what population produced it. In Orchid jargon, the varieties that refer to color often are retained in a name, while those designating a growth form or area from which a plant came are often dropped. There may be many different clones of *C bicolor alba*, each grown from an individual seed. Clones that are exceptional in some way or gain an award of some kind are also given a clonal name. Thus, *C bicolor alba* 'Orchidglade' SM/SFOS refers to a specific clone named Orchidglade that was granted a Silver Medal by the South Florida Orchid Society. Divisions of that plant, even if the divisions were made before the award, will carry the same clonal name.

Orchid hybrids also follow the same general protocol, i.e. a Genus and Specific name. The specific name is not described in a scientific journal, but is registered with the RHS. If a hybrid is a cross of two *Cattleya* species, it still carries the same genus name. If, however,



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

Understanding Your Plant Tag

March 2002

by Dr. Courtney Hackney, hackneau@comcast.net

[Orchid Growing Tips](#)

the hybrid combines two or more genera an artificial Genus will also be registered with the RHS. The hybrid between *Laelia purpurata* and *C mossiae* was registered as *Laeliocattleya Callistoglossa*. Note that both names are capitalized. Clones of hybrids may also be given varietal names as well as clonal names.

There are natural hybrids that are found in the wild. Most were originally described as new species, but later recognized as natural hybrids. These are designated as follows: *Cattleya xHardyana*, the natural hybrid between *C dowiana* and *C warscewiczii*. If an orchid nursery remakes this hybrid it should be called *Cattleya Hardyana* to separate it from its wild kin.

Many modern hybrids can be traced back many generations to the original species from which they were derived. Records of who first made the hybrid, when it was made and when it first flowered are recorded in Sander's List of Orchid Hybrids that is maintained and updated by the RHS. Once you learn the language, volumes of "Sander's" can be a wealth of information and a lot of fun to examine.