

# Appendix:

## Orchid potting mixtures – An abridged historical review<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

There is little doubt that potting media development over time has been the salvation of orchid growers (Bomba, 1975). When epiphytic orchids were first introduced into England and other European countries in the 18th century growers could not envision plants growing in anything but soil. “‘Peat and loam’ were good for everything and frequently became the mass murderers of the first generation of epiphytic orchids,” Hooker is believed to have said around the end of the 19th century; England had become the graveyard of tropical orchids. Undoubtedly this was in reference to the concern individuals were having over the potting media problems. This problem also drew the attention of such noted individuals as John Lindley and Sir Joseph Paxton, as well as the *Gardener’s Chronicle*, who noted that “The Rule of Thumb” had nothing to say about orchid growing; it was only effective in orchid killing (Bomba 1975). Fortunately, the ingenuity of growers solved the problem as innovative potting mixes evolved over the years.

After visiting a number of orchid growing establishments it immediately becomes obvious to any orchid grower, professional or hobbyist, that orchids, both epiphytic and terrestrial, will grow in a wide variety of media. It has often been stated that epiphytic orchids can be grown in any medium except soil as long as watering and fertilization are adjusted to fit the mix being used. Terrestrial orchids seem to thrive in any medium that contains 40% or more organic matter. Reading cultural recommendations from the early days of orchid growing is most interesting and highly recommended. On the following pages, the history and evolution of orchid potting media during more than 100 years will be surveyed as a comprehensive review of a fascinating subject. Potting mixes are the backbone of orchid culture, so the more that is known about them the better the plants will grow. When reading the literature it becomes obvious that some authors are not aware of the Latin word ‘medium’ and its use. People will often say the one best media or I have a media when they should have used the word ‘medium.’ In other works the plural ‘media’ is used in place of the singular ‘medium.’ Another erroneous use of these

<sup>1</sup> The survey of literature pertaining to this appendix was completed in May 1995; it was submitted in July 1995, and the revised version was accepted in November 1995.

words is to add 's' to make 'mediums' or 'medias.' Properly the terms are 'medium' for the singular and 'media' for the plural. It should also be noted that the spelling of some words may differ, e.g., mould (UK) versus mold (USA), hapu versus hapuu, or fibre (UK) versus fiber (USA). Throughout the text these words will be spelled as they appeared in the original sources and no attempt will be made to edit them.

## **Chronological review**

### *Early potting mixes: prior to 1900*

The popularity of orchids began to increase very rapidly as more plants were imported into England in the 1800s. Unfortunately many did not survive long under the cultural conditions of the times. The plants were subjected to hot and moist conditions in small dark glass structures often referred to as stoves or stove houses. At that time growers did not readily distinguish between terrestrial and epiphytic genera, subjecting them all to similar cultural conditions. A typical grower would use a mixture of leaves and some form of rotted wood as a potting medium. The pots would then be placed on a bench with sawdust or bark from the tanning industry as a mulch around them, almost burying the pots. This was undoubtedly to keep the pots from drying out.

Miller (Reinikka, 1972) in 1768 bemoaned the fact that plants "grow naturally on trees in America and both Indies, but as these plants cannot by any art yet known be cultivated in the ground, it would be of little purpose to numerate them here, though, could the plants be brought to thrive by culture, many of them produce very fine flowers of very uncommon form." Even as early as the mid-1700s growers were well aware that potting mixes needed improvement if orchids in culture were to survive. However, the literature indicates that there was little communication among growers at that time.

In the early 1800s Sir Joseph Banks started experimenting with growing orchids in coarsely woven wicker baskets, almost cylindrical in shape and of varying diameters depending on the size of the plants (Reinikka, 1972). The openings in the weave were to allow the growth of the plants in any direction. He placed a layer of 'mould' (probably leaf mold) in the bottom of the basket and positioned the plant on top on the mold. Moss was added to cover the roots. Depending on its age, the consistency of leaf mold changes, and at some stage it may have less aeration and become soggy. To replicate the medium, it would be necessary to know the right stage of decomposition of the leaf mold which was used. Around the same era the Rev. William Herbert, Dean of Manchester, successfully grew some epiphytes on tree limbs. His method was likened to grafting as he would notch the limb, place the plant in the notch, and then pack moss around its base. He also developed an automatic watering device to assure that the moss would stay wet. This was an early attempt to

try to duplicate as closely as possible the conditions under which epiphytes grow in nature.

In 1860, Linden published *Pescatorea*, a book that was envisioned as a comprehensive work on all the orchids grown at that time: in short, it was to be an illustrated catalog. Unfortunately, his sponsor died suddenly, and only one volume with 48 color plates was published<sup>2</sup>. This book not only described the orchids but also gave cultural directions for each one. In most cases specific instructions for potting mixes were given. Rather than repeat all 48 recommendations four examples have been taken at random:

(1) *Dendrobium farmeri* requires a medium with good drainage. This was accomplished by putting a layer of charcoal and sphagnum moss in the bottom of the pot. Then "the pot was filled to above the brim with a mixture of  $\frac{1}{3}$  very fibrous peat, sieved to remove the smallest soil particles;  $\frac{1}{3}$  charcoal and  $\frac{1}{3}$  sphagnum." (2) *Odontoglossum hastilabium* also requires good drainage in the bottom of the pot. Here potsherds were suggested. They were covered with "layers of fibrous peat, intermixed with sphagnum, alternated with layers of upright pieces of potsherds. The upper part of the pot was filled with a mixture which consisted of  $\frac{1}{3}$  fibrous peat, in small pieces;  $\frac{1}{3}$  cut sphagnum and  $\frac{1}{3}$  charcoal. The entire mixture should be sieved before hand." (3) The description for *Schomburgkia undulata* depicts the general thinking on culture for that era very clearly. In suggesting that the plants be mounted on sphagnum moss-covered blocks of wood, it was noted that the "roots attach only partly to the wood and their extremities *search for food* (emphasis added) in the humid atmosphere of the greenhouse." (4) *Phragmipedium (Uropedium) lindenii* is "best cultivated in a medium-sized pot with the bottom  $\frac{1}{3}$  filled with potsherds. This layer is covered with a layer of sphagnum moss and then the pot is filled with a mixture of  $\frac{1}{3}$  washed and dried charcoal in pieces just about the size of a walnut,  $\frac{1}{3}$  fibrous peat, broken between the fingers, again into pieces of the size of a walnut, and  $\frac{1}{3}$  sphagnum that is cut with scissors."

Since growing plants on blocks of wood requires considerable care, the author (Linden, 1860) suggested that this plant should really be grown in pots or baskets. The medium for pots or baskets was prepared as follows: "first the receptacle is filled nearly to the rim with long pieces of acacia bark or charcoal, placed upright. The empty spaces are filled with sphagnum. The plant is fixed on top of this construction in such a way to ensure its base is somewhat below the rim of the receptacle, in order to stop new roots from passing across."

It appears that growers felt orchid roots would not grow out of the pot if the medium were below the rim. There are many growers at present who wish this were a reality today<sup>3</sup>. During this era it was a common practice to suggest

<sup>2</sup> This book has now been translated into English with the original illustrations reprinted in color.

<sup>3</sup> It is hard to envision an orchid greenhouse with all epiphytic orchids having most of their roots in the pots.

## TABULATED INSTRUCTIONS FOR

Many of the more popular and well-known Orchids are included in the This cannot possibly be avoided without materially increasing the size and price of Should, however, any reader desire further information respecting any of the is a working gardener) will be pleased to supply full particulars on receipt of a

ON WATERING.—All Orchids during the summer months, when making growth, porous, and whenever the compost becomes dry give the plant a good soaking.

NAMES OF PLANTS	Page	Whether to grow in Cool, Intermediate, or Warm House	Whether preferring a shady, sunny, or partial or sunny position	Whether best grown in baskets or pans and suspended, or in pots on the stage	The most suitable compost		
ACINETA BARKERI .. .. .	91	Interme- diate	partial	baskets	peat and sphagnum moss		
— DENRA .. .. .							
— HUMOLDTII .. .. .							
ACROPERA LODDIGESII .. .. .	91	ditto	ditto	baskets or pans	ditto		
* — ARMENIACA .. .. .							
ADA AURANTIACA .. .. .	91	Warm end of Cool house	shady	pots	ditto		
AÆRIDES CRASSIFOLIUM .. .. .	113	Warm	ditto	{ pots or baskets	sphagnum moss		
— ORISPUM .. .. .		Interme- diate		pots			
— LINDLEYANUM .. .. .							
— WARNERI .. .. .							
— FALCATUM .. .. .		Warm		pots or baskets			
— HOULETIANUM .. .. .							
— LEONIS .. .. .							
— LAWRENCEÆ .. .. .							
— ODORATUM .. .. .							
— QUINQUEVULNEA .. .. .							
— SAVAGEANUM .. .. .							
— SUAVISIMUM .. .. .							
— VIRENS .. .. .							
— MACULOSUM .. .. .							
— AFFINE .. .. .							
— LOBBI .. .. .							
AGANISIA CYANEA .. .. .	114	ditto	sunny	{ baskets pots or baskets	peat and sphagnum		
— IONOPTERA .. .. .				pots			
— SESQUIPEDALE .. .. .							
ANGRÆCUM EBURNEUM .. .. .	115	ditto	shady	{ basket or pans	sphagnum		
— ARTIOLATUM .. .. .							
— CITRATUM .. .. .							
— FASTUOSUM .. .. .							
— LEONIS .. .. .							
— SCOTTIANUM .. .. .							
— SANDERIANUM .. .. .							
ANGULOA CLOWESII .. .. .	90	Cool	ditto	pots	peat and sphagnum		
— RUCKERI .. .. .	132						
— UNIFLORA .. .. .	..						
ANSELLIA AFRICANA .. .. .	..	Warm	partial	{ baskets or pots	ditto		
ARPOPHYLLUM GIQUANTEUM .. .. .	..	Interme- diate	sunny	pots	ditto		
BARKERIA ELEGANS .. .. .	..	ditto	very sunny	baskets or blocks	sphagnum		
— LINDLEYANUM .. .. .							
— SKINNERI .. .. .							

\* These Orchids, with a few others, are apt to get a little irregular in making growth.

Figure A-1. Two of the 16 pages of the 'Instruction Table' from *The Amateur Orchid Cultivator's Guide Book* by Burberry published in 1900. In the column 'the most suitable compost' only materials are listed, leaving growers to decide on their own how much of each ingredient to use when more than one ingredient is listed.

## THE TREATMENT OF ORCHIDS.

following Calendar, but, unfortunately, there are also many that are omitted. the book, which, in the interest of the numerous small growers, is not desirable. species mentioned, or those not included, the author (who, it must be remembered, remittance of 1s. for each name.

delight in a good supply of water, that is, supposing the compost is, as it should be,

The best time to repot or top-dress	The usual time of blooming	From whence flower spikes appear, and whether on old or new growth	Whether showing spike directly growth is finished or otherwise	The proper resting period, if any	Amount of water at the roots when resting	Whether to winter or rest in Cool, Intermediate or Warm House
after flowering	spring	base of new pseudobulb through bottom or side of basket	spikes push soon after bulb is completed and grow slowly	the winter months	water sparingly	Warm
{ when new growth commences	summer or autumn	base of new pseudobulb	after rest	when growth is finished	ditto	Intermediate
spring	early spring	ditto	when growth is nearly matured	never inactive	{ water sparingly during winter	ditto
{ February	summer	stem; axil of the 3rd or 4th leaf from the top	ditto	winter	water moderately only	{ warmest end of Intermediate
{ spring						
{ February						
{ when new growth commences						
February	winter	base of new pseudobulb stem: axil of the 3rd or 4th leaf from the top	as soon as growth is finished	ditto	ditto	ditto
{ spring	spring	stem; axil of the 2nd or 3rd leaf from the top	ditto	ditto	keep moist to support flower spikes	ditto
{ ditto when growth commences	early summer	from base of new growth	{ flower spikes come simultaneously with new growth when pseudobulb is completed	ditto	very little	Intermediate
ditto	early winter	apex of new pseudobulb	after rest	late winter	ditto	Warm
ditto	spring	ditto	just before growth is finished	winter	ditto	Intermediate
early spring	autumn	ditto		ditto	very little indeed	ditto

Figure A-1. Continued

specific media for specific genera. Unfortunately, most descriptions were vague as to size of particles, or what was meant by 'sphagnum moss,' 'cut sphagnum moss' or 'long sphagnum moss.' This makes it difficult at present to reproduce these media exactly. In that era authors recommended mounding the medium above the pot and placing the plant on top of the medium, a practice which was definitely a detriment to watering. If the moss were allowed to dry between waterings any additional applications of water would just run off, and the plants would not thrive.

Williams (1885) suggested a medium for epiphytic orchids consisting of half rough fibrous peat (the size of hen's eggs) and half live sphagnum moss. Terrestrials, on the other hand, were described as requiring a stronger compost consisting of turfy loam chopped into pieces (the size of a walnut), leaf mold or peat and a little rotten cow or horse dung. Although Williams made an effort to be explicit regarding size, he failed to state how much of each material should be used. A grower taking three different amounts of each of the three materials listed for terrestrial orchids could come up with 27 different media, some of which would undoubtedly produce poor growth. A few years later Watson and Bean (1890) recommended media similar to those suggested by Williams but added that the compost should not be packed 'tolerably' firm. There is no notation how to determine when the medium is 'tolerably' firm. Shortly thereafter, Burberry (1890) devoted 16 pages in his book on orchid culture to tables entitled *Tabulated Instructions for the Treatment of Orchids*, wherein he had a column entitled 'the most suitable composts' (Fig. A-1). Basically in this column he listed four composts: peat and sphagnum moss, sphagnum moss, peat and loam and peat, sphagnum moss and loam or fibrous loam. Unfortunately no amounts were given for the ingredients to assist in making up any of 'the most suitable composts.'

Castle (1887) stated that "Good results in plant culture are largely dependent upon the soil employed for them, and too little attention is often paid to the subject." He further stated that this was particularly important for orchids. After that he proceeded to list the ingredients used in orchid composts. Peat, which is highly variable should be ordered stating it is for orchids so the dealer will supply the right kind<sup>4</sup>. Sphagnum, loam, charcoal and pot shards were also mentioned. He stated that for exotic orchids "loam is not much used except for *Calanthe* and some *Cypripedium* species. The loam should be of a light fibrous character, heavy and clayey loam being especially avoided. He also stated that soils of a very sandy nature should be avoided." Manures, too, played a prominent role in his cultural outline. Cow, horse, sheep and fish manures were mentioned as well as soot. Nowhere in the paragraph on these materials is there any information on the amount of each component to be used in any one mixture. This only leads to problems. For example, too much

<sup>4</sup> Since orchid culture was still in its infancy at that time, how many dealers would be aware of the proper form of peat to supply?

manure could be incorporated, to the detriment of the plants. The age of manure is also very important as some manures are high in ammonia and can be toxic to plants<sup>5</sup>.

Cultural notes provided by Watson and Bean (1890) cited drainage as an important fact in developing potting mixes. They stated that since the majority of orchids require more frequent watering, "there must be provided ample drainage or the material around the roots of the plants rots or becomes sour, and the plants sicken." Their recommendation for a potting medium was "For soil take equal parts of living sphagnum moss and fibrous peat – that is, peat from which nearly or quite all of the fine particles have been removed. The mixture should be pressed *tolerably firm*, but not hard, and it should be built up into a small cone, the apex of which may be about an inch, or, in larger specimens, two inches above the rim of the pot; and upon this the plant should sit, for, if buried below, the chances are that the eyes which spring from the base of the pseudo-bulbs will decay and great injury to the plants will occur." As noted earlier, this mode of potting can only lead to problems in watering, because as the surface of the medium dries, chances are high that the water would run off the surface without penetrating the medium. Modern growers know that it is far better to keep the medium about 1.25 cm ( $\frac{1}{2}$  inch) below the rim of the pot so that adequate amounts of water can be applied.

#### *Potting mixes: 1900–1950*

During the first half of this century a number of changes were made, and some new substrates were introduced. This was the era when osmunda was the preferred medium, and there was limited interest in searching for substitute media. However, some changes occurred in the latter part of the period.

Osmunda<sup>6</sup> came into vogue in the early 1900s and soon became the medium of choice for epiphytic orchids. It was the most widely used medium in the USA during the subsequent 50 years (Davidson, 1957). No other medium before or since enjoyed such great popularity, although throughout the first 75 years of this century a variety of media have come and gone. A compendium of many of these is presented in the following paragraphs.

An early book of note on orchid culture in the United States was written by White (1927). It includes a brief table summarizing media used at that time. White's recommendations for terrestrials was  $\frac{1}{2}$  chopped fibrous loam,  $\frac{1}{4}$  leaf mold and  $\frac{1}{4}$  sharp sand. *Calanthe* was cited as an example of a genus to grow in this medium. *Cypripedium* and *Cymbidium* plants were considered semi-terrestrials and were to be grown in  $\frac{1}{3}$  chopped sod,  $\frac{1}{3}$  leaf mold and  $\frac{1}{3}$  osmundine. Osmundine was deemed suitable for epiphytes, such as *Vanda* and *Phalaenopsis*. White also listed a class he called semi-epiphytic, which included

<sup>5</sup> Fresh manure applied as a mulch to rose beds in a greenhouse will completely defoliate plants.

<sup>6</sup> Osmunda, osmunda fiber and osmundine have been used interchangeably as common names for the root of one of the three species of *Osmunda* fern growing in the United States.

*Cattleya*, *Laelia*, *Dendrobium* as well as a number of additional genera and their hybrids. A mixture of  $\frac{3}{4}$  osmundine and  $\frac{1}{4}$  live sphagnum moss was recorded for them. For seedlings coming out of flasks White recommended spongy Oregon peat moss. At the same time Costantin (1927), writing in France, noted that sphagnum and *Polypodium* root mixtures were being used successfully with *Cattleya* plants.

There were few changes of note as far as potting mixes were concerned in the 1920s and 1930s. Orchid growing was still in its early stages, and communication among growers was minimal. The 1940s saw a number of changes in orchid potting mixes. There was also an upsweep in orchid growing due to the favorable economy after World War II and the fact that many American GIs visited areas of the Pacific basin and became interested in tropical plants, especially orchids.

“Osmundine or orchid peat is the horticultural name for the fibrous aerial roots of the large woods fern *Osmunda regalis*” (Watkins, 1942) that serves as an orchid potting medium. However, whether the black wiry portion or the soft brown portion of the root mass was best seemed to be a very controversial issue among growers. Even though osmundine was the medium of choice in that era, Watkins also felt that charcoal was an indispensable ingredient as it kept “the medium sweet and contributed to aeration.” Live Florida sphagnum [moss around the base of newly potted plants made for a thrifty, healthy condition according to Watkins. He also recommended using hard wood forest leaf mold, in an advanced stage of decomposition, plus some well-rotted cow manure for terrestrials and semi-terrestrial orchids. No proportions were given<sup>7</sup>.

A very interesting account about orchid potting media was written by Soysa (1943). He dealt with media prevalent in India, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and the surrounding areas. Soysa listed the various materials used by category. Vegetable: mosses, fibers, leaf mold, wood bark, charcoal, peat, cork and pine needles; mineral: burnt brick, cabook stone (laterite), potsherds, sand, loam, limestone and gravel; animal: bone, egg shell, and oyster shell. He stated that orchids are very versatile and can be seen growing in a variety of media. This contradicted some of the aforementioned media, and the views of Williams (1883) and Watson and Bean (1890) and many other early authors who believed that there was only one medium for each genus. Later publications supported Soysa’s statement that most orchids will thrive in a variety of media.

Growers in Burma, according to Soysa (1943), used coconut fibers or *Asplenium* fern in their wood-block or tree-fern pots. Those using clay pots employed a mixture of brick and charcoal and watered it with a manure tea. These materials were preferred as they did not decay under high humidity and

<sup>7</sup> Here again ingredients are given but not ratios to use making it difficult to duplicate what the author used. Also Watkins does not define what he means by “in an advanced stage of decomposition.”

temperatures. Growers in Java (then Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia) did not rely on the brick and charcoal mixes but instead used *Polypodium* fern roots and bird's-nest fern (*Asplenium nidus*) roots. Only the coarse roots were used as they were slow to decay. The root clumps were beaten before use to remove all other material, leaving only the coarsest roots. These roots are similar to osmunda but not as long lasting. When used to cultivate orchids they were handled in the same manner as osmunda.

Soysa (1943) also noted that in the Celebes, Indonesia, hollow coconut husks and wooden crates or baskets were the common containers into which a mixture of tamarind wood pieces, crushed limestone and chopped fern roots were added. Growers in the Celebes added limestone because *Dendrobium*, *Vandopsis* and *Paphiopedilum* species were found growing on limestone cliffs. Coconut husks were commonly used as containers or as part of media throughout the tropics where coconuts are either native or introduced. Unfortunately, during the 1960s and 1970s the lethal yellow disease devastated many coconut plantings in tropical areas. As a result husks are not as readily available at present as they were a few decades ago. This caused growers to seek new materials.

Watkins (1949) was still a great advocate of osmunda as a potting medium. He reported that American orchid growers believed that there was no better potting material than osmunda. At that time this material was still readily available. However, soon thereafter, during the 1950s and 1960s, commercial and residential development in many areas along the east coast of the United States wiped out many of the native stands where *Osmunda* fiber was harvested. Watkins further noted that while *Osmunda* was a popular medium in the United States, a fact also noted by Northen (1950), mixtures of *Polypodium* fern roots and sphagnum moss were being used in England with great success. The success with these mixtures was also evident in descriptions of media by Costantin (1927) for France and Soysa (1943) for Java, Indonesia. Watkins also mentioned that coconut husks were still popular in some Pacific islands. Other materials listed by Watkins as being used in the 1940s were silica gravel and Haydite, both of which are inert. He noted further that there was a "shredded bark of a hardwood tree from the west coast of the United States which had been suggested as a possible substitute for osmunda fiber." This was just prior to the influx of fir bark in the late 1950s. Cypress boards, baskets, logs and hollow cypress knees were also used as orchid containers, "either as a matter of economy or to gain artistic effect" (Watkins, 1949).

According to Watkins (1949) sphagnum moss and leaf mold were still being used by some growers. Watkins also listed composts for terrestrials, namely *Cymbidium*, *Paphiopedilum*, *Phaius* and *Calanthe*. They consisted of the following:

*Cymbidium* potting mixture no. 1

2 parts loam

- 2 parts osmunda screenings
- 1 part sharp sand
- 1 part rotted cow manure

*Cymbidium* potting mixture no. 2

- 1 part osmundine
- 1 part rotted cow manure
- $\frac{1}{2}$  part rotted oak leaves
- fine charcoal, bonemeal and sand sprinkled in as mixed

*Paphiopedilum* potting mixture no. 1

- 2 parts shredded osmundine
- 1 part chopped sodded loam
- 1 part sharp coarse sand
- Add a 12.5 cm (6 inch) pot of dry cow manure to each wheelbarrow of the medium

*Paphiopedilum* potting mixture no. 2

- 2 parts shredded osmundine
- 1 part turfy loam
- 1 part live sphagnum moss

*Phaius* potting mixture

- 1 part rotted cow manure
- 1 part sandy loam
- 1 part peat or shredded osmundine
- Mulch cow manure on the pots

*Calanthe* potting mixture no. 1

- 1 part chopped sod loam
- 1 part rotted cow manure
- 1 part sharp coarse sand

*Calanthe* potting mixture no. 2

- 1 part fibrous loam
- $\frac{1}{2}$  part composted leaf mold
- $\frac{1}{2}$  part rotted cow manure

No information is given about some of the terms, e.g. sodded loam, turfy loam, loam. Also there is no indication as to how much charcoal, bone meal, and sand "is sprinkled in" in *Cymbidium* mix no. 2, making it difficult to prepare these media.

For 30 years (1930s to 1950s) the book *Orchids for Amateurs* by Briscoe (1950) was popular in England. In it the author recommended a number of substrates for growing orchids. He stated "Of late years osmunda and A1 fibers have become exceedingly popular --." *Polypodium* fern root, a finer fiber was popular for seedlings and small plants, whereas the use of sphagnum

moss was declining. Depending on the genus being grown, additions of leaf mold, peat, silver sand or fibrous loam was added to potting mixes. As an example, for *Cypripedium* and similar plants the medium should consist of “fibrous loam which will form the staple, to which is added a small portion of sphagnum moss and peat. Here again the sphagnum may be omitted except for a few live heads, which may be arranged with the last layer of soil.” The author does not mention amounts of any of the ingredients to be used in preparing the potting mix, yet the book remained popular for over 30 years, indicating once again that orchids can tolerate a wide variety of potting media.

#### *New mixes evolve: 1950–1970*

The 1950s and 1960s saw some interesting changes as far as potting mixes were concerned. Interest in orchids blossomed after World War II, but sources of osmunda, the medium of choice, were rapidly diminishing. Consequently, interest in finding replacement media was high. In the early 1950s Vacin (1952) working with *Cymbidium*, and testing a variety of media, concluded that any medium containing 50% redwood fiber would give the best growth. Kono (1956) and Miyamoto (1952), working with *Vanda* and *Dendrobium*, respectively, found tree fern to be a good medium alone or as an additive. Miyamoto (1952) determined that dendrobiums grew just as well on tree fern logs as they did in osmunda. However, Kono (1956) found that a combination of tree fern chips and either charcoal or cinders was a fine medium for vandas. The search for new media was beginning to evolve.

*Cymbidium* orchids will grow and struggle along in most any type of soil, but results will be slow, according to Boyle (1950). However, Boyle noted that in their native habitat *Cymbidium* orchids are not accustomed to growing in soil. Their roots are more or less exposed and are free to travel without obstructions. Therefore, it would be logical to say that the soil they are planted in should be loose. Consequently, the medium used and recommended by Boyle consisted of:

- $\frac{1}{4}$  good soil
- $\frac{1}{4}$  #5 pea gravel (about the size of a pea)
- $\frac{1}{4}$  peat moss
- $\frac{1}{8}$  coarse oak leaves
- $\frac{1}{8}$  well rotted steer manure

He also mentioned using ‘decomposed granite’ in his mixes (this was also included in potting mixes by Schirmer and Schirmer, 1953, which see), but had ceased to use it because it decomposed too rapidly and soon looked like mud, and as such impeded drainage.

During the 1950s composts for *Vanda* plants seemed to revolve around two materials. Writing between 1948 and 1956, Summer (1948), Bowman (1954) and Kono (1956) all listed tree fern and either cinders or charcoal as a medium

for vandas in Hawaii. At that time mainland growers were also using a high percentage of charcoal in their mixes. Miyoshi (1953) suggested that the best medium for *Phalaenopsis* growing in baskets was cinders (washed through hardware cloth) and tree-fern chips. At the same time osmunda was still the medium of choice on the mainland.

Osmunda was the only medium for epiphytic orchid mentioned by Noble (1951). She did note that some orchid growers were experimenting with gravel culture for orchids, but results were not sufficient to recommend it at that time. In mentioning terrestrials Noble pointed out that they were planted in 'dirt' in the same manner as other potted plants. No definition was given for 'dirt.' Northern (1950) suggested the following medium for *Cymbidium* plants and other terrestrials:

- $\frac{1}{3}$  loam
- $\frac{1}{3}$  shredded osmunda
- $\frac{1}{6}$  sand
- $\frac{1}{6}$  cow manure

This is yet another mixture with almost 50% organic matter. This percentage of organic matter proposed by Vacin (1952) seems to prevail for *Cymbidium* mixes.

Composts for *Paphiopedilum* plants were the subject of controversy in the 1950s because the published potting mixes varied greatly as far as their components were concerned. Takahashi (1952) stated that straight osmunda was the best material, while fellow Hawaiian Yamada (1953) could find no differences in growth when he grew *Paphiopedilum* in 100% 'dirt' sifted through a 0.3 cm by 0.3 cm ( $\frac{1}{8}$  inch by  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch) screen or a compost of cinders and shredded tree fern or osmunda fiber. Mott (1955b), working with a variety of media at Cornell University, found that moss peat was the best medium for *Cypripedium*. Once again it appears that, like many other genera, *Cypripedium* plants will grow in a wide variety of media.

As was typical of that time, Schirmer and Schirmer (1953) stated "Osmundine, a fern root, is most commonly used as a potting material." In this case they were referring to basket culture. They did note that redwood bark fiber, cedar hay (shredded cedar bark) and green sphagnum were also used. In addition they recommended osmundine for epiphytes being grown in pots, with the fiber tightly packed vertically in the pots. The mixes recommended by Schirmer and Schirmer (1953) for terrestrials also proved to be interesting. In the case of *Cymbidium*, they used a mixture consisting of:

- 2 parts leaf mold
- 1 part top soil
- 1 part ground redwood fiber
- 1 part decomposed granite or crushed rock

In addition, to each wheelbarrow of the above mix they added:

One pound (500 g) coffee can of fine crushed charcoal, one pound (500 g) coffee can of bonemeal, four one-pound (500 g) coffee cans of steer manure.

Although the amount of each ingredient is given, terms such as 'decomposed granite' are somewhat vague. An earlier writer (Boyle 1950) claimed it decomposed too fast. A grower might wonder just how decomposed the granite should be before it can be used successfully. The mixture recommended for *Paphiopedilum* was slightly different. It consisted of:

- 1 part top soil
- 1 part leafy leaf mold
- 1 part peat moss
- $\frac{1}{2}$  part sharp sand
- $\frac{1}{2}$  part fine charcoal

Since *Paphiopedilum* species are often found growing near limestone rocks, Schirmer and Schirmer recommended adding 1 cup of agricultural lime to each wheelbarrow of the above mix. They recommend leaf mold for *Cymbidium* and 'leafy leaf mold' for *Cypripedium* but do not tell the reader how to distinguish between the two leaf molds. Also fine charcoal could be considered to be dust by some growers. Information about the particle size in such cases would be most helpful. Ratios of ingredients and particle sizes seem to be the two parameters that are most often overlooked in describing media. Consequently, duplicating another grower's medium is not easy and those attempting to emulate their competitors were not always successful. Furthermore, differences in control regimens (watering, humidity, light intensity, air movement) and the plants themselves will not produce the same results even when using the same medium.

In a very extensive discussion of *Cymbidium* composts, Matkin (1953) noted the requirements of a good growing medium and the various materials that should or should not be used. Manure of all kinds, leaf mold, composts and charcoal, according to Matkin, were unacceptable because they lack uniformity<sup>8</sup>.

Matkin (1953) stated that a good *Cymbidium* compost must anchor the plant and support it physically. It must hold moisture in an available state for a reasonable period of time, and offer a source of mineral nutrients for plant growth. After establishing these basic requirements he suggested a typical compost with the following ingredients by volume:

- 3 parts sandy loam or fine sand
- 4 parts loose brown peat moss

<sup>8</sup> Since the advent of orchid growing we have seen numerous articles recommending these ingredients as parts of various orchid composts. This is the first report I have come across which lists components which should not be used, but I must agree with Matkin that these materials do lack uniformity. However, if a component (e.g., manure) is obtained from the same source and cultural practices are adjusted to it, I see no harm in using it.

1 part #5 crushed rock (about pea gravel size)

He also included a fertilizer mix to incorporate when preparing the compost which consisted of:

Hoof and horn	2 ounces (65 g) per bushel (35 liters) or $2\frac{1}{2}$ pounds (1.1 kg) per cubic yard
Single superphosphate	2 ounces per bushel or $2\frac{1}{2}$ pounds per cubic yard
Sulfate of potash	$\frac{1}{2}$ ounce (15 g) per bushel or 10 ounces (350 g) per cubic yard
Dolomite lime	2 ounces per bushel or $2\frac{1}{2}$ pounds per cubic yard
Gypsum	2 ounces per bushel or $2\frac{1}{2}$ pounds per cubic yard

Care should be taken to make the mix uniform (Matkin, 1953).

Smith (1953) reported good results with *Phaius grandifolius* (*P. tankervilleae*) grown in a mix consisting of 3 parts garden loam and 1 part finely chopped osmunda fiber. He attributed his success to the addition of one level 10 cm (4") pot of 4-12-4 fertilizer to each wheelbarrow of mix ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  bushels; 85 l). He also recommended annual repotting in this mix.

Yamada (1953) had some very interesting comments on growing *Paphiopedilum* plants in Hawaii. He noted that "Books on orchid culture classify the *Cypripedium* (*Paphiopedilum*) as a cool house orchid requiring a night temperature of 60° F. From such reading most amateurs in the Hawaiian Islands took it for granted that cypripediums (paphiopedilums) could not be flowered in Hawaii." However, this was proven wrong. Since most *Paphiopedilum* species are terrestrials found growing in the ground with leaf mold and pine needles scattered at their roots (the author cited *Cypripedium acaule*, a true *Paphiopedilum*), a terrestrial mix is necessary. Yamada successfully grew *Paphiopedilum* plants in 100% 'dirt' sifted through a  $\frac{1}{8}$ " by  $\frac{1}{8}$ " screen (approx. 0.3 cm × 0.3 cm) and using only the coarse grains<sup>9</sup>. To test the medium, Yamada suggested pouring water on the 'dirt' and if it passed through rapidly, as if through a wire screen, the mix could be used. He also noted that in Hilo some growers were using a mixture of cinders and shredded hapuu (tree fern) fibers. Cinders  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch (1.25 cm) or larger are used to anchor the plant, and the shredded hapuu, 1" (2.5 cm) long, is intermixed with the cinders to fill the pot. Later, Warne (1958) recommended osmunda with a little leaf mold for *Paphiopedilum* leads and straight osmunda for back growths, whereas Merkel (1958) called for straight osmunda with a little bone meal added for paphiopedilums.

Like many writers of this era, Butterfield (1955) listed the major materials used in potting mixes for orchids. He included such items as osmunda, *Polypodium* fern, sphagnum moss and charcoal but did not list any specific mixes

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately a definition of the word 'dirt' is not given. Therefore since soils are highly variable it would be difficult to duplicate the medium exactly. At one time *Cypripedium* included species which are now part of *Paphiopedilum*. This creates confusion at present when the older literature does not include the names of species.

or give any recommendations for epiphytic orchids. He did list two mixes for terrestrial orchids: mix 1 comprised  $\frac{2}{3}$  coarse oak-leaf mold and  $\frac{1}{3}$  small gravel; mix 2 consisted of  $\frac{1}{2}$  fibrous loam,  $\frac{1}{4}$  leaf mold and  $\frac{1}{4}$  sharp sand or small gravel. Also for some terrestrials (no genera given) rich loam may be sufficient as a medium.

The end pages of Watkins' (1956) book had an 'Orchid Growers Reference Table' (Fig. A-2) listing 21 genera, potting media, etc. Like many of the early British books (e.g. Burberry 1900; Fig. A-1) potting ingredients were listed for each genus, but if more than one ingredient was listed no ratios were provided. Even at that time growers were still reluctant to share 'growing secrets' with their competitors. This made it safe to list the number of ingredients in a mix, without indicating the amount.

The early 1950s witnessed the introduction of fir bark and its coming into vogue in the USA. One of the earliest accounts of its successful use was by Hubert (1955) who reported on his trials in which he compared growing cattleyas in bark, osmunda and compost. After one year he eliminated the compost and after the second year his results with bark were so satisfying he potted everything in it. At first he used large chunks of bark (1" to  $\frac{1}{2}$ "; 1.25–25 cm) but later changed to  $\frac{1}{4}$ " (0.6 cm) and smaller. He preferred the chopped to the shaved material as the former contained less fines (minute particles). He also reported success growing *Epidendrum*, *Odontoglossum*, *Dendrobium* and *Vanda* in bark. McLellan (1956) reported that as a medium bark was easier to handle, cost less than osmunda, and produced excellent root growth. At that time the so called 'fir bark' contained 80% white fir (*Abies concolor*) and 20% ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*). Bacher (1956) also reported success using bark and confirmed the reports of both Hubert and McLellan. During this period a wide variety of barks appeared on the market (e.g., Ivory Bark, Vita Bark, Wonder Bark, Naturgro and Ease). Only those containing fir bark or redwood survived until the oil crisis in the late 1970s when many lumber mills resorted to burning bark in response to the shortage and rapidly increasing prices of crude oil. Hence barks lost some of their original luster and have yet to regain their place of prominence as an orchid medium. However, many of the potting mixes on the market today have bark as one of the components.

It should be noted that even though bark became very popular during this era not everyone was satisfied with their results after changing to it. Forman's (1957) experience with bark was not good. He claimed that; "1) the buds failed to open; 2) the stems are too short for proper blooming; 3) the inflorescences fail to mature; 4) the color of the flower is not quite so intense as previous when the plants were grown in osmunda and 5) there is a deficiency of nectar on the new growths with resulting paper thin sepals."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This experience was typical of many growers during that period. In such cases the growers did not change their fertilizing and watering practices when they changed from osmunda to bark. The fir bark was blamed for poor performance of the plants which was due to the lack of nitrogen in most cases.

# ORCHID GROWERS'

KIND OF ORCHID	USUAL TIME IN BLOOM	WHEN TO POT
<i>Cattleya</i>	Hybrids, the year around	Right after flowering
<i>Calanthe</i>	Winter	Spring, when eyes swell
<i>Chysis</i>	Spring	Just before growth starts
<i>Coelogyne</i>	Late winter, early spring	Infrequently, after flowering
<i>Cycnoches</i>	Winter	Before growth starts
<i>Cymbidium</i>	Winter, early spring	Spring
<i>Dendrobium (evergreen)</i>	Winter	Small, after flowering
<i>Dendrobium (deciduous)</i>	Spring	Small, after flowering
<i>Diacrium</i>	Winter	After flowering
<i>Epidendrum</i>	Winter, spring, summer	After flowering
<i>Laelia</i>	Variable with species	After flowering
<i>Lycaste</i>	Winter, spring	Before growth starts
<i>Miltonia</i>	Summer	July-August, small
<i>Odontoglossum</i>	Variable, usually summer	September
<i>Oncidium</i>	Mostly springtime	After flowering
<i>Paphiopedilum (green leaf)</i>	Mostly spring	After flowering
<i>Paphiopedilum (mottled leaf)</i>	Mostly spring	After flowering
<i>Peristeria</i>	Summer	Before growth starts
<i>Phaius</i>	Spring	When basal eyes start
<i>Phalaenopsis</i>	Variable with lineage	After flowering
<i>Sophronitis</i>	Winter, variable	After flowering
<i>Stanhopea</i>	Warm months	After flowering, in rafts
<i>Vanda (strap)</i>	Variable with lineage	When needed
<i>Vanda (terete)</i>	Warm months	Bed grown
<i>Vanilla</i>	Summer	Bed grown

Figure A-2. Two of the end pages from the *ABC of Orchid Growing* 3rd ed., by J. V. Watkins 1956. In the column 'potting medium' only ingredients are listed with no ratios or clues given as to how much of each ingredient goes into each mix.

## REFERENCE TABLE

POTTING MEDIUM	MIN. NIGHT TEMP.	% OUTDOOR SUMMER LIGHT	WHEN TO FERTILIZE
Osmundine	60°	20-30	When root action starts
Loam, manure and sand	65°	15-20	Summer, when foliage expands
Osmundine	60°	15-20	Summer, lightly
Black osmundine	55°	10-15	Summer, lightly
Osmundine	60°	15-20	Summer, lightly
Loam, peat, manure and sand	50°	half-shade	May-September
Black osmundine	65°	half-shade	May-September
Black osmundine	50°	half-shade	When foliage is expanding
Osmundine	60°	20-30	Usually not fertilized
Osmundine or tree fern plank	55°	20-30	When foliage is expanding
Osmundine	50°	20-30	When roots are growing
Osmundine	55°	15-20	Usually not fertilized
Black Osmundine	50°	15-20	Usually not fertilized
Black Osmundine	48°	15-20	Usually not fertilized
Osmundine	55°	20-30	Usually not fertilized
Osmundine or loam and peat	55°	10-15	Warm months
Osmundine or loam and peat	60°	20-30	Warm months
Loam, manure and sand	60°	15-20	When foliage is expanding
Loam, manure and sand	55°	half-shade	When flower scapes appear
Black osmundine	65°	10-15	Warm months only
Osmundine	60°	20-30	Usually not fertilized
Osmundine	60°	15-20	Usually not fertilized
Charcoal or osmundine	60°	20-30 or more	When roots are growing
Charcoal or earth beds	50°	full sun	During summer
Osmundine or earth	50°	half-shade	During summer

Figure A-2. Continued

*Cymbidiums* received their share of attention during the fifties as far as potting media were concerned. Vacin (1952) listed six different composts for *Cymbidium* and described their nutritive qualities and the type of growth he obtained with each compost. His best compost contained 50% redwood fiber and consisted of the following ingredients:

- 50% (by volume) finely shredded redwood bark fiber
- 50% (by volume) of the following mix:
  - 12 parts leaf mold (usually oak leaves),
  - 3 parts partially decomposed bean straw,
  - 3 parts well rotted cow manure,
  - 3 parts fresh osmunda screenings,
  - 4 pounds of bone meal,
  - 3 pounds of vermiculite,
  - 3 handfuls ferrous sulphate,
 (each part in this formula refers to a wheelbarrow load).

Sherman (1955) suggested a slightly different compost containing redwood shavings, peat moss and fine sand or sandy loam. He stated that originally in England the typical compost consisted of osmunda and sphagnum with perhaps a few beech leaves. This mix was still being used by some, but during the evolution of composts the trend was toward using redwood fibers. Mott (1955a,b) experimented with 10 potting mixes for *Cymbidium* and *Paphiopedilum insigne*. Included in the mixes were 100% peat, 100% soil and 100% manure and a variety of combinations of these materials. After two years, he had his best results when the plants were grown in 100% peat moss. Growth in this potting medium was better than in any of the other media tried. Mott stated that peat moss in addition to producing the best growth resists decay, retains its physical condition for 2–3 years, holds water and yet is well aerated and is practically free of diseases. In addition, the low pH of the peat moss hinders bacterial decay. Later studies by Powell (1957) suggested that a 1-1-1 mix containing peat, shavings and fine sand produced good plants. This compost is similar to the one mentioned by Northen (1950). Again it is evident that *Cymbidium* plants can grow in a variety of media as long as organic matter is a major component.

“There have been many different attempts to develop a potting medium which will approximate conditions allowing for quick drainage as well as maximum circulation of air around the roots. Disregarding the odd types of media (the author knows of one *Cattleya* plant growing in a keg of nails and doing remarkably well), most media fall within these groups: osmunda, bark or chips and gravel” (Bateman, 1957). Bateman noted that bark and chips (fir, spruce, cedar, pine, etc.) had come into wide use in the two years prior to his article (1955–1956) and that claims for bark usage had ranged from utter failure to it being considered the ultimate potting mix. However, Bateman contended that gravel came closer to approximating natural conditions than

other potting mixes (e.g., osmunda, bark). He listed three types of gravel he had used – Haydite, poultry grit (granite) and river-bottom gravel. He found river-bottom gravel to be the best. The roundness of the stones allows for better drainage, and it was the least costly of the three. He recommended three sizes to use:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. For plants out of flasks                         | $\frac{1}{16}$ – $\frac{1}{8}$ " (0.15–0.3 cm) |
| 2. For plants in $1\frac{1}{2}$ –2" (3.5–5 cm) pots | $\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{1}{4}$ " (0.3–0.6 cm)   |
| 3. For plants in 3" (7.5 cm) pots and up            | Use unscreened gravel                          |

In discussing orchid potting media at the Second World Orchid Conference, Sheehan (1958) gave a brief history of the evolution of potting mixes. He noted that during the 1950s there was a large influx of barks with trade names such as Ivory Bark, Wonder Bark, Ease and Naturgro being offered as potting media. Included in this group were fir, redwood, cedar and southern pine. There was also one mix containing hardwood barks from New England, but unfortunately this material had two problems: it rotted too rapidly, and the type of bark varied from shipment to shipment. Consequently, it was withdrawn from the market. Ease, a byproduct of the cedar tan bark industry, was a very clean, sterilized product that not only served as a good medium but also added a touch of cedar aroma to the greenhouse. Unfortunately, the supply of Ease was very limited and not sufficient to supply the market<sup>11</sup>. Only the fir barks proved to be worthy candidates and survived for a number of years.

While barks were becoming popular in the United States traditional media were still prevalent elsewhere. Ann (1958) pointed out that growers in Singapore preferred perforated pots, ranging in size from 4" to 20" (10 to 45 cm) in diameter for *Dendrobium*, *Phalaenopsis*, *Cattleya* and strap-leaf *Vanda*. She stated that they did not use sphagnum moss, osmunda or tree fern but relied entirely on "broken bricks and charcoal brought down to the size of walnuts." The charcoal was thought to be necessary to 'sweeten' the medium (Ann, 1958). The 'brick-charcoal' mix was also recommended by Soysa (1943) for Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and other tropical areas where there is heavy rainfall and organic media tend to decompose very rapidly.

McLellan (1958), in discussing the commercial aspects of growing orchids in bark, stated that barks were not new as far as orchid cultivation was concerned. In the late nineteenth century in England and France barks were tested as growing media but with little success. He attributed the present-day success to the use of soluble fertilizers with the correct pH and laboratory equipment which facilitated proper monitoring. At that time no one had tried *Abies concolor* (white fir), *A. magnifica* or *A. grandis*, which were not only acceptable but also according to McLellan "a perfect medium for growing orchids." The results of their first test were "... mainly astounding root action with notice-

<sup>11</sup> Had 'Ease' become a reality it might have been a great deterrent to insects in the greenhouse.

ably heavier sturdier roots, about 30% more leads, not to mention the purely business advantage of something like a 10% savings in production costs . . .” McLellan was aware that there was some skepticism about growing in bark (Forman, 1957). He noted that after six months in bark plants started to turn yellow. After consulting Matkin (University of California) and Davidson (Rutgers University) the problem (nitrogen level) was corrected, and McLellan switched everything to bark.

According to Fennell (1959) “osmunda fiber, a coarse black fiber, is the traditional potting material for most orchids.” He also noted that in the previous few years a revolution in the methods and materials of orchid potting had taken place. Barks replaced osmunda, and pine and fir barks were widely used. Although Fennell had stated that osmunda was a suitable potting material for most orchids, it was obvious that in 1959 barks were already replacing it as the medium of choice. He cited both the advantages and disadvantages of using barks, but the best advantage, according to Fennell, was summed up in one of the slogans of a bark supplier; “If you aren’t potting with bark, you’re working too hard.” This was undoubtedly a reference to the tedious process of potting in osmunda.

No matter how much a medium is extolled there always seem to be areas where it fails to work. A good case in point was made by Ghose (1959). He stated that “sphagnum moss is no good for the plains of India or other hot countries where it soon rots and turns slimy, but fern roots (e.g., osmunda, *Polypodium* and *Asplenium*) and tree fern blocks are good.” One interesting aspect discussed by Ghose was the dressing applied to the top  $\frac{1}{3}$ ” (0.8 cm) when potting. It consisted of 5 parts broken bricks, charred or well-cleaned bones and one part *Polypodium* fiber. The top dressing was added to assist in holding moisture and prevent the compost from becoming hard. It is worth noting that Ghose recommends the use of sphagnum moss as a top dressing when earlier he advised against it. However, he recommended that if sphagnum moss were used as a top dressing it should be removed in the advent of rain. This could present problems if the plants were grown out-of-doors or in shade houses as one would be constantly putting the moss on and taking it off. Ghose also noted that leaf mold should not be used as it deteriorates rapidly in the tropics and causes disease problems. However, in the case of terrestrials, Ghose recommends a mixture of leaf mold and a little dry cow dung, charred if possible<sup>12</sup>.

Even as bark was increasing in popularity other media were still being evaluated. Australian tree fern (*Cyathea arborea*) was the best material found by Bayley (1958) for growing orchids in Barbados. She stated that it lasted longer than osmunda and was similar to Hawaiian tree fern (*Cibotium*) but appeared to have finer fibers. As did other authors, she noted that the fiber’s

<sup>12</sup> Ghose is not consistent in his recommendations, as he states in one paragraph that a material is not good and then suggests its use in another paragraph.

longevity made repotting less of a chore: it was not imperative to repot on time since rot was not a problem for several years.

Davidson (1960) also was trying new combinations of ingredients. As a result of his studies he recommended the following mixture as a medium for epiphytic orchids:

- $\frac{1}{3}$  peat (poultry grade),
- $\frac{1}{3}$  oak leaves (dried but not decomposed),
- $\frac{1}{3}$  redwood fiber (insulation grade, Palco Pete's mulch)

This medium became known as New Jersey No. 1.

"Virtually every orchid genus – and often almost every species within a given genus – has its own requirement for compost and potting" (Hawkes, 1961)<sup>13</sup>. He then went on to state "most present day growers grow the bulk of their epiphytic orchids in straight osmunda fiber," noting that in Europe *Polypodium* is a substitute for osmunda. For *Paphiopedilum*, *Masdevallia*, *Pleurothallis* and *Bulbophyllum* as well as the majority of orchid seedlings a mixed compost of osmunda with some sphagnum moss added is used. Tree fern is also mentioned as a medium used by many orchid growers. It should be pointed out that barks, which were very popular at that time were not discussed in the section on composts but mentioned elsewhere. Hawkes starts out his discussion of barks with a brief description of changes that have taken place with composts over time (much of which had been covered by earlier writers). According to Hawkes, barks that were used included Douglas fir, white fir and several types of pine and cedar and were becoming very popular. Although no details were given it was noted that the barks came in different particle sizes and that the material should be sifted before use to remove the fines.

An era of potential change in potting media began in the early 1960s when a variety of materials were being tried, many with success. Ackerson (1961) compared coke with osmundine and bark and found it to be as efficient as osmundine in moisture-holding capacity. Coke is sterile, and there is no danger of overpotting in it. Ackerson also included used osmundine and bark in his trials since these partially decomposed materials had higher water-holding potential than either product in the fresh state. Coke proved to be as good a medium as the others, and it also had an added plus – it was cheaper. Although coke was readily available and in plentiful supply in that era it never became the medium of choice for the majority of the growers. At the same time Hawkinson (1961) noted that eight years had elapsed since fir bark had become widely used for orchids. Its continual use was fostered by the fact that knowledge of how to use it was developed rapidly and backed by scientific evidence.

<sup>13</sup> This is an interesting statement, when osmunda had been the medium of choice, and numerous species from a great variety of genera and many hybrids did grow extremely well in one medium.

The advantages of tree fern fiber as a potting medium was discussed by Neilson (1961), Brown (1964) and others. "There are other fine media for growing orchids of course," but after using tree fern for 20 years Brown (1964) found that no matter what other media he tried he always returned to hapuu, the Hawaiian tree fern. He noted that hapuu came in three grades of fibers (coarse, medium and fine), as slabs, in chunks or as totem poles. The range of sizes and shapes makes it suitable for a wide variety of orchid genera. Hapuu is an ideal medium because it meets all these requirements: "durability; moisture-holding capacity; drainage and aeration; ability to withstand nutrients but still make them available to the plant: minimum salt accumulation; and last but not least cost." (Brown, 1964). Brown noted that he had a plant in California that had been in coarse tree fern fiber for 16 years with no dieback, and the fiber was still good. In this respect Brown was like many others who praised hapuu as a medium. Longevity has always been a high point in discussions of its value. Tree fern (hapuu), for many years a popular medium in the Hawaiian Islands, became increasingly more popular worldwide as the decline in bark supplies set in (Holguin, 1976; Chang, 1976; Little, 1964).

When looking for new media for epiphytic orchids, several basic requirements must be met in order to develop a good potting mixture. Factors to consider (Little, 1964) are availability, ease of handling, lasting qualities, non-toxicity, and aeration. The material that impressed Little most was Mexican tree fern as he felt that it came closer to meeting all the requirements than any other medium he tried. He felt the main problem with Mexican tree fern was its longevity and the tendency for growers to overpot. This can be overcome, (Little, 1964) by selecting containers that will accommodate growth for only 2 years and repotting after that. Even though the Mexican tree fern can last longer he felt this was the best way to handle it.

Unlike many researchers looking for a new potting medium composed of a single ingredient, Davidson (1965) was continually studying combinations of a variety of materials. After testing a number of formulations his research indicated that the following medium was good for *Cattleya* plants:

- 6.5 parts fir bark
- 1.5 parts coarse peat moss
- 1–1.5 parts redwood fiber
- 0.5–1.0 part perlite

No particle sizes were given for the various ingredients. However, this potting mixture was a forerunner for mixes that would be developed in the 1980s and 1990s.

Silva (1966) listed a number of materials that were being used in Brazil in the 1960s. Basically they were tree fern (*Dicksonia sellowiana*), *Polypodium* fern, osmunda (*Osmunda regalis*) and coconut fiber. There were no recommendations as to mixes or genera for which the materials should be used.

A new material 'solite' emerged in the 1960s. Solite is a lightweight alu-

minum slag aggregate that is used to make concrete blocks. Wilkins (1968) showed that this material was an excellent medium for epiphytic orchids. It is a mix that will hold up indefinitely and can be reused. Although the material is basically inert, it should be sterilized before reuse. In his article Wilkins explained how to prepare the "little clods of baked mud" to be sure that all the fines and impurities had been removed. Wilkins used solite for 5 years and found it to be very satisfactory under his conditions.

*Present-day potting mixes: 1970 to date*

From the late 1970s there was a steady but gradual decline in the use of barks only as potting media. Supplies of tree fern fiber also declined since this plant was considered by many to be an endangered species. Thus, this period saw an upsurge in the area of prepared potting mixes for orchids, many of which still contained bark as one of their ingredients. Other materials, such as New Zealand sphagnum moss, were introduced into the market along with synthetic materials such as Oasis blocks. The evolution of potting mixes continued.

When considering potting mixtures for epiphytic orchids "a light but rough mixture must be chosen," according to Oplt (1970). He mentioned that in experiments with many mixtures the best results were obtained using the roots of *Osmunda regalis* and *Polypodium vulgare* fern species, the moss *Sphagnum squarrosum*, and decayed beech leaves. These were usually mixed at the rate of  $\frac{1}{3}$  each of *Polypodium* or *Osmunda*, *Sphagnum* and beech leaves with a few pieces of charcoal added. Oplt further stated that in the aforementioned mixture the moisture content could be regulated by varying the amount of *Sphagnum* and fern root. He noted that for *Dendrobium*, *Phalaenopsis* and *Vanda* the mixture should contain a larger amount of *Osmunda* or *Polypodium*, whereas for *Cattleya*, *Bulbophyllum*, *Epidendrum*, *Oncidium* and *Odontoglossum* the mixture should contain a larger amount of *Sphagnum*. Unfortunately, no amounts were given for either modification, leaving it up to the grower to determine the content of the mix. Oplt indicated that in recent years in Europe dead pine bark was being used as a supplement to the aforementioned medium<sup>14</sup>. The new medium consisted of:

- 1 part *Osmunda* or *Polypodium*
- 1 part *Sphagnum*
- 1 part beech leaves
- 1 part pine bark

He noted that good results were obtained in all cases and that terrestrial orchids could be grown in the same mixture if 1 part compost or clods of loam was added.

<sup>14</sup> This statement would indicate that the original mixture mentioned by Oplt was probably developed in the 1950s or 1960s. Unfortunately, no dates are given in his book.

Growers in Venezuela, (Luciano, 1970) were becoming concerned about the high cost of their favorite potting mix – Mexi-fern and fir bark (3-1 v/v). In searching for local materials that might be readily available and reasonably priced, Luciano found a potential material in the waste product of the oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) industry. The broken pieces of the palm fruits, when washed free of any oil residue and graded, proved to be a very fine medium for orchids. Luciano listed three grades: coarse, for *Cattleya* and *Vanda*; medium, for *Phalaenopsis* and fine, for seedlings. No size range was given for the different grades. Coconut husks have been used as media components in many tropical areas and orchids grow on a variety of palm species in the wild. Therefore it would seem logical that the fruits of the oil palm as well as other palm fruits might prove to be a good medium or ingredient.

In describing a potting mix for *Lycaste*, Fowlie (1970) wrote “There is little doubt that the roots luxuriate in Loamite mix, partially due to the purifying effects of the charcoal contents, and keep in excellent condition.” He listed the ingredients as:

- 3 cu ft (85 liters) Lomite (moist) 1-0-0 (the subcharcoal chips)
- 3 cu ft (85 liters) fine fir bark
- 2 gal (8 liters) sand blasting sand
- 11 oz (350 ml) single superphosphate
- 18 oz (550 ml) oyster shell (available at feed stores)
- 30 oz (1 liters) dolomite lime
- 2 oz (60 ml) saltpeter (drug store)

The Lomite (which consisted of subcharcoal kiln roasted bark chips) mix which proved successful had to be replaced annually, as once it began to deteriorate it broke down rapidly. Fowlie also noted that he had also successfully used palco wool (red wood fiber) as a medium for *Lycaste*.

At the Sixth World Orchid Conference Hetherington (1971) stated that “there are no ideal basic ingredients for a *Cymbidium* mix. Any *Cymbidium* mix will be found to have common properties with almost any other. Precisely what is used in a given area is determined by what local materials best meet the specifications for the compost.” He listed the physical and chemical properties sought for in a basic mix:

1. High organic content, like that provided by wood barks, leaf mold, redwood bark, horticultural peat, etc.
2. Good moisture retention.
3. Excellent drainage. There must be no stagnation.
4. Good supply of nutrients through slow decomposition and retention of ‘food’ on the mix particles.
5. An acid pH, 5.5–6.0 being optimal.

6. Body. Sufficient physical body to hold the plant firmly.
7. Durability. The mix must not break down or wash away.

These are much more exacting than the three basic media requirements listed by Matkin (1952). Hetherington further stated that most American mixes are chosen in varying proportions from the following basic ingredients: redwood bark, coarse German peat moss, fir barks, coarse leaf mold, clay-free silt sand and redwood shavings. He also observed that additional nutrients were added to these mixes to ensure good growth.

The more popular kinds of potting materials are osmunda, tree fern (both of which are fibrous, spongy-like roots) and fir bark broken into various particle sizes according to Johnston (1974). He also noted that many of the potting mixes being used contained some bark and that fir bark enjoys popularity because it is easy to use, consistent in quality and long lasting. Other advantages of fir bark were that it was hard to overwater and had large air spaces, allowing good aeration and drainage. Fir bark (the bark of red and white fir or Douglas fir) came in a variety of particle sizes and was graded as 'fine' ( $\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{1}{4}$ " ; 0.3–0.6 cm), 'medium' ( $\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ " ; 0.6–1.2 cm) and 'coarse' ( $\frac{1}{2}$ –1" ; 1.2–2.5 cm). Seedlings and fine-rooted orchid plants (e.g. *Miltonia*) grew best in fine bark, which also had the highest moisture content. *Vanda* and *Phalaenopsis* plants with large roots should be grown in the coarse, whereas *Cattleya* and other orchids with similar roots should be potted in medium. Johnston did not recommend using very fine or dusty bark particles as they tended to clog pore spaces, increasing water-holding capacity and reducing aeration.

The use of artificial media was mentioned by Schoser (1974). He and his colleagues were searching for six years for a convenient potting material. They found a foam material, polystyrene, in the form of chips, scraps or shreds to be suitable. The material is completely inert, takes up less than 2% moisture, is neutral, cheap, nearly impervious to decomposition and releases no harmful ions. They suggested that this new material was satisfactory and convenient for orchids. This is one of the earlier reports regarding the use of plastic as orchid media.

Burkey (1975) surveyed potting mixes used by *Paphiopedilum* growers around the world. He found a wide variety of materials being used including sphagnum moss, fir bark, cork, Styropor (expanded polystyrene), beech leaves, perlite, charcoal, shell grit and milled peanut hulls. According to Burkey this indicates that *Paphiopedilum* plants are quite versatile as far as media were concerned. He listed 11 composts used by firms around the world. Two of these are given below to show some of the variations he found.

#### A. Ratcliffe – England

- 16 parts by bulk, coarse fir bark (sifted to remove dirt and fine particles)
- 1 part by bulk, roughly chopped sphagnum moss
- 1 part by bulk, charcoal.

## B. Rand – California

400 ml (ca 1 pint) of #60 silica sand

1½ cups of hoof and horn

½ cup of single super phosphate

½ cup of sulphate of potash

To this one added enough small, seedling grade fir bark to make 2 cu ft (60 l) of mix. Some redwood fiber (about 32 oz; 1 kg) can also be added to enhance the stability of the mix<sup>15</sup>.

One of the most popular potting materials for *Phalaenopsis* in the Philippines, (Valmayor, 1975) was the basal portion of *Asplenium nidus* (bird's-nest fern), locally known as 'paslak.' The fibers of this medium are dark, durable and absorb a lot of moisture; they are similar to the black wiry fibers of *osmunda*. During the same period, tree fern (called snake wood in Taiwan), longan (*Euphoria longana*) bark and sphagnum moss were the three main ingredients used in Taiwan (Su, 1975) for potting materials. He stated that longan<sup>16</sup> was still under evaluation and the results were being awaited.

In 1975, Penningsfeld reported at the Eighth World Orchid Conference on 15 years of research using peat and a plastic foam (Styromull; 1/1 v/v) as a medium for growing orchids. He also conducted nutritional studies to determine the best fertilizer for this mix. In addition he reported on studies of media for terrestrial orchids and recommended the following mix for *Cymbidium*:

3 parts *Pinus sylvestris* bark chips

3 parts crushed dry oak leaves

3 parts milled peat moss

1 part old cow manure

1 part sphagnum moss

1 part coarse sand.

One of the favorable aspects of this medium, according to Penningsfeld, was the fact that plants grown in this mix needed to be repotted every three years. Since the work was done in Europe, the medium might not last as long in warmer climates like California where *Cymbidium* is widely grown. Also some of the components may not be available everywhere.

Chang (1976) was one of many writers who listed Hawaiian tree fern, hapuu, as an excellent medium for orchids. He pointed out that the long life of this product reduced the need for repotting as it remained stable for many years. The value of hapuu was also extolled by Brown (1964). Tree fern was still readily available at that time in Hawaii.

<sup>15</sup> These mixes were selected at random from the 11 listed and do not necessarily show the extremes as far as differences are concerned.

<sup>16</sup> Longan is a fruit similar to lychee.

In 1976, writing in England, Wilma and Brian Rittershausen reported basing their composts mainly on osmunda and live sphagnum moss. Sphagnum moss helped in the retention of moisture and kept the acidity in the compost in balance. The moss must be green and freshly collected, so it will grow over the surface of the compost and aid in watering. Osmunda fiber keeps the compost open and well drained. Both ingredients can also supply nutrients for the growth of orchid plants. They also stated that osmunda was becoming harder to obtain and more costly, forcing growers to seek an alternative material. Some growers were substituting a mixture of peat and coarse sand or grit. In order to ensure that the mix would stay open (i.e. remain aerated) a small amount of chopped bracken (fern) was added. Some growers substituted plastic chips or granulated polystyrene for sand. Further, they noted that a number of non-resinous barks could be used as additives or on their own as a complete compost.

Holguin (1976) briefly reviewed the history of various media used for *Cattleya* plants, pointing out that a mixture of chopped osmunda and sphagnum moss was popular in the 1930s. He noted that this medium often remained too moist and caused root rotting. Ashton's mix (redwood and oak leaves) appeared in 1945 as an orchid medium, and in the 1950s barks were introduced. The popularity of barks soared in the late 1950s and early 1960s according to Holguin. Barks were later modified by adding redwood fibers, perlite and German peat moss. The latter was a forerunner of some of the potting mixes available today.

"The great adaptability and vitality of orchids is evident in their ability to show excellent growth when grown in any number of different composts!" (Richter, 1977)<sup>17</sup>. He goes on to describe the characteristics of good components for media, but before listing the materials he notes that "the ratio of different materials used is a point hotly debated by all orchid growers." Osmunda topped Richter's list of ingredients, but he bemoaned the fact that it was costly and hard to obtain. This was also true of *Polypodium* fiber, his second most important ingredient. Sphagnum, although short-lived, was readily available and cheap. It, too, presented problems as freshly collected material often contained contaminants such as snails and slugs. Beech leaves, tree fern, fir bark and peat rounded out his list of organic materials. Inert materials mentioned as possible additives were plastics (flakes and cut pieces), broken brick, pumice granules and broken coke. Some of the latter could be used with a little sphagnum in an almost hydroponic culture.

Poole and Sheehan (1977) studied the effects of media and supplementary microelement fertilization on growth and chemical composition of *Cattleya*. They worked with four media (tree fern, tree fern + redwood (80-20 v-v), fir bark, and peat and perlite (50-50 v-v)) and seven different fertilizer rates. After

<sup>17</sup> The lead-in sentence to his discussion on composts (potting mixes) supports what the author and others have been saying over the years. Epiphytic orchids can be grown in any medium except soil as long as watering and fertilizer practices are adjusted to the medium being used.

one year they found that media significantly affected all growth responses. Plants grown in peat and perlite were superior to all others.

In 1977, Davidson also proposed several new orchid potting media. Here again, Davidson was working on combinations of materials. These new mixtures were also given the prefix NJ (New Jersey) to signify the state where Davidson was working. After considerable study, Davidson found his NJ #1 (1960) to still be a good medium. He added his NJ #6 as another good medium. Both were recommended to growers for use. The NJ #6 mix contained the following ingredients:

- 1 part peat moss
- 1 part oak leaves
- 1 part redwood fibers
- 1 part coarse clean sand

Davidson recommended the two mixes for epiphytic orchids. These mixtures were considered as replacements for both osmunda and fir bark, which were becoming scarce at that time.

There is a brief section on culture in *The Brazilian Bifoliate Cattleyas and Their Color Variants* by Fowlie (1977) in which he made some interesting comments on composts. He started with a brief discussion on osmunda, noting its long (3–6 year) life but pointed out that it was difficult to obtain<sup>18</sup>. He felt that osmunda had been a good medium and one not subject to fungus problems. Hapuu, used by Hawaiian growers, was also a good fibrous medium. Although, according to Fowlie, hapuu lasted only 2–3 years, most orchids thrive in it, especially for those hobbyists whose orchids are being cultivated outdoors in tropical climates depending on local rainfall<sup>19</sup>. Fowlie felt that hobby growers in temperate or subtropical climates particularly, who must water his/her plants artificially (with a hose), there was no better medium than fir bark<sup>20</sup>. He felt that the myriad of fungal hyphae growing in bark represented a decided disadvantage, rather than a cause for not using bark. Redwood wool was also a good medium but had a short, one-year, life, according to Fowlie. Since bifoliate cattleyas, the subject of the book, are all epiphytes he suggested using cork slabs or limbs as a medium. *Cattleya* plants grow very well on cork slabs hung at a 45° angle. He stressed that only one plant should be planted on a slab as two different plants will grow together and be hard to separate after several years of growth on the slab. Fowlie felt that species that were difficult to grow were best cultured on slabs.

A very interesting medium was not only successful for *Brachypetalum paphiopedilums* but also for a number of other genera (Heuer, 1977). Basically, the medium components were 2 cubic feet (60 liters) of fine fir bark (seedling grade)

<sup>18</sup> The effects of urban sprawl on the east coast of the United States were being felt.

<sup>19</sup> Brown (1964) reported that tree fern lasted 16 years in California. It would be interesting to learn if there was any difference between the fern used in 1964 and that used by Fowlie in 1977.

<sup>20</sup> This was the period when fir bark was in its prime.

and 1 pound can (450 g) of silica sand (#60). To this he added a number of other ingredients:

- 1 cup of dolomite
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of bone meal
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of hoof and horn
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of aluminum sulfate
- 1 tablespoon of single superphosphate (powdered form)
- $\frac{5}{8}$  cup of potassium sulfate
- 1 tablespoon of ferrous sulfate
- 1 teaspoon of manganese sulfate
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon each of zinc, copper and molybdenum

Heuer based his potting mix on the fact that the *Brachypetalum Paphiopedilum* species are found growing on limestone outcroppings and that cold water breaks down calcium faster than hot water. He also stated growers often tend to use excess calcium due to the fact it is plentiful in the native habitat of these plants.

Production of *Dendrobium* cultivars for cut flowers in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) relied on a medium composed of charcoal (derived from mango wood) and tile pieces. According to Hagen (1976), in the wetter areas of the country the mix was 20% charcoal and 80% tile, whereas in the hotter, drier areas the proportion of charcoal was raised to 40%. He also noted that some growers were mounting their plants on tree fern pieces. Similar brick and charcoal media are used (personal observation) by some growers in the Caribbean area for *Dendrobium* cut flower production.

Sessler (1978) listed a number of potting materials for orchids including osmunda, bark, tree fern logs, hapuu (shredded tree fern) and orchid mixes. She stated that the latter now come in a great variety of combinations of the aforementioned materials. No suggested combinations are given.

In New Guinea many orchids are grown as garden plants, and according to Millar (1978) frangipanni (*Plumeria rubra* and *P. obtusifolia*) and calabash (*Crescentia cujete*) trees are excellent hosts for epiphytic orchid plants<sup>21</sup>. She noted that both of these trees were easy to grow and that cuttings up to 2 m (6 feet) tall could be rooted to produce instant trees for orchids to grow on. *Antidesma ghaerembilla* and *Tectona grandis* (teak) as well as many other local trees can also be used as hosts. Tree-fern slabs and coconut husks are used as well as plaques for orchids grown in New Guinea. Tree fern and brick and charcoal are used as potting mixes for container-grown plants<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Little has been mentioned in the literature to date about culturing epiphytic orchids on trees, yet calabash trees in their native habitats are excellent hosts for epiphytic orchids (personal observation). Also citrus trees in tropical areas that have not been sprayed are often festooned with a wide variety of epiphytic genera (personal observation).

<sup>22</sup> Brick and charcoal mixes are often dominant in tropical rainy areas because they are well drained yet hold moisture. (Broken bricks are used with great success by Flora Sari Orchids near Jakarta, Indonesia - J.A.).

Leonardt (1980) discussed some of the potting mixes used for various orchid genera in Hawaii. The materials varied depending on genera. For example, under *Cattleya* he listed a variety of media any of which would produce satisfactory results: redwood, fir bark, tree fern (hapuu), osmunda fiber, as well as gravel and sand mixes, including volcano cinders. He stated that bark was the easiest to use and with proper watering and fertilization would produce good plants. Terrestrial mixes were composed of three parts coarse material and one part medium-grade material. Although a variety of materials were listed including macadamia nut hulls and wood chips, there was no indication as to which were the coarse ingredients or the medium ingredients nor were any particle dimensions given.

*Odontoglossum* plants in Australia were grown in equal parts of bark and charcoal according to McGraith (1980). The particles had to pass through a  $\frac{3}{4}$ " (2 cm) screen but not through a  $\frac{1}{4}$ " (3 cm) screen. The fines were also removed and the mixture soaked in a fungicide for one week before using. The specific type of bark used was not named.

One medium tried as a substitute for the dwindling supply of fir bark was red lava rock. According to Arp (1980) red lava rock had several advantages over fir bark. The rock does not change over time and can be reused; the root environment is the same for two or more years after repotting. A grower can easily overpot to produce specimen plants without fear that the medium will rot and root injury will occur. Further, red lava rock cannot be overwatered, and the plant is fertilized, not the medium. Red lava rock does hold moisture on its surface. The only genus with which Arp had problems growing in red lava rock was *Phalaenopsis*. *Cattleya* alliance plants, dendrobiums, and vanda-ceous species produced excellent growth in this medium. Arp did not mention whether other colors of lava rock could produce similar results.

*The Complete Book of Orchid Growing* (Black, 1980) had an engaging section on orchid potting mixes. Black began with a brief but interesting discussion of the history of orchid potting mixes to date. In this discussion he mentioned the use of Corsican pine, which is the hardest of all barks. It is slow to break down and can be used several times<sup>23</sup>. Since orchids are grown in various localities and need different treatments, Black felt it was necessary to be adaptable. Consequently, he listed a number of media combinations for different genera (Table A-1). He suggested that these mixes should be general guides for orchid growers rather than be 'the medium.'

"All the above orchids require a little coarse (not the powdered) bone meal and crocks or polystyrene at the bottom of the pot, up to 5 cm (2') depending on the size of the pot." Black did not give any suggestions as to what materials might be considered when adapting the potting mixes listed above. Apparently that was left to the grower.

<sup>23</sup> This was the first mention of Corsican pine I have come across, and if it lasts as long as stated it is strange that there is not more in the literature about its use. As a matter of fact Black does not mention it in his mixes.

Table A-1. Mixes for different species

Species	Ingredient	Ratio (by volume)
<i>Cattleya</i>	Medium bark or chopped osmunda fiber	$\frac{1}{2}$
	Sphagnum moss	$\frac{1}{4}$
	Charcoal	$\frac{1}{8}$
	Perlite or perlag	$\frac{1}{8}$
<i>Cymbidium</i>	Harvested bracken fern, chopped coarsely, or medium bark or osmunda fiber	$\frac{1}{2}$
	Sphagnum moss	$\frac{1}{4}$
	Charcoal and perlite or perlag	$\frac{1}{4}$
<i>Miltonia</i> , <i>Odontoglossum</i> and intergenerics	Fine bark or finely chopped osmunda fiber	$\frac{1}{2}$
	Sphagnum moss (live)	$\frac{1}{4}$
	Fine charcoal and perlite or perlag	$\frac{1}{4}$
<i>Paphiopedilum</i> and other terrestrials	Medium bark or chopped osmunda fiber	$\frac{1}{4}$
	Sphagnum moss (fine) or moss peat,	$\frac{3}{4}$
	Sprinkling of charcoal and perlite or perlag	
	(a cup full per 4.55 l (1 gal))	
<i>Phalaenopsis</i>	Chopped live sphagnum moss	$\frac{3}{4}$
	Perlite or perlag and charcoal	$\frac{1}{4}$
<i>Vanda</i>	Chopped live sphagnum moss	$\frac{3}{4}$
	Charcoal and perlite or perlag	$\frac{1}{4}$

In a discussion of orchid growing media, Batchelor (1981) starts out by addressing alternative media, mainly sticks and stones. "Sticks – naturally enough, parts of trees and other plants, in the form of branches, plaques (cork or tree fern) come closer to duplicating conditions of epiphytic orchids in the wild. And stones – at the other end of the media spectrum, gravel culture for potted orchids has its share of advocates" (Arp, 1980). Having noted the potential of these media, Batchelor then discussed conventional potting mix ingredients. "By far the growing medium most commonly used for orchids is a mixture of organic and frequently synthetic materials. Gone are the days when osmunda fiber was used almost to the exclusion of every other possible medium." Batchelor gave in-depth summations on fir bark, tree fern, peat moss and perlite. He included a table, 'Guidelines in selecting growing media', but unfortunately was not specific with items in the potting mix column. As an example all it stated in the column was 'coarse grade – porous', which is of little help to an amateur seeking a potting mix.

In 1981 the medium of choice in Hawaii for *Paphiopedilum* was fir bark mixed with small amounts of charcoal chips and perlite to maintain good drainage (Fujiwara, 1982). Marble chips and/or ground oyster shells were added to help maintain a uniform pH.

Not all media recommendations are the results of published research papers. Sometimes they are the results of clever ideas by individuals. An example appeared in the *American Orchid Society Bulletin* in 1981 in the form

of an advertisement. It stated "At last the potting material that gives you the six benefits you want . . . ORCHID BLOCKS." This was an advertisement for polystyrene blocks cut to fit into 15 cm (6 in) pots and would give you all the benefits you wanted. The blocks would not decompose like bark and did not require repotting every two years. This would be fine for orchids that did not like to be disturbed. Little information has surfaced on the longevity of these 'blocks'<sup>24</sup>.

In 1984 Henderson discussed orchid culture in the United States observing that the most widely used potting material at that time was fir bark or the many bark-based mixes. He also mentioned 'Off Mix' – a combination of fir bark, peat, and perlite developed at Rutgers University. Tree fern was also very popular at this time but was becoming more expensive and less readily available as some species had been declared endangered. Charcoal was also being used widely, especially for vandas. He noted that Florida growers were switching to charcoal because some barks decomposed too rapidly. A simple mix of charcoal, peat and Styrofoam was proving to be a satisfactory medium for virtually all orchids. Servo, a byproduct of the sugar industry, was finding localized use<sup>25</sup>. Solite, a fired clay product, was being used by some south Florida growers in locations where plants were exposed to high amounts of rainfall. Henderson also indicated that in some areas of the United States potting ingredients included shredded coconut fibers, walnut and rice hulls. He concluded by saying that potting mixes are limited mostly by imagination. Developing a medium is often determined by the type and availability of organic materials found in any given area.

Noble (1987) addressed the need to consider particle dimension in relation to root size when developing a medium. Orchid plants with large roots such as *Vanda* need "a very open medium of chunky materials so air is available. *Phalaenopsis* have roots of medium thickness and can use a medium grade of tree fern or bark, for example. Orchids with fine roots, such as, miltonias and most seedlings do better in a finer medium"<sup>26</sup>. The author also delineated the advantages and disadvantages of tree fern osmunda and bark mixes (usually combinations of these ingredients), rocks and sphagnum moss. She gave no specific recommendations, however. Only three lines were devoted to terrestrial orchids, stating that they are grown in mixes consisting of "soil; compost; dehydrated dairy manure and other elements to make a rich garden loam."

Stewart (in Cribb, 1987) listed a number of compost ingredients used in varying combinations by growers for *Paphiopedilum*. She mentioned that peat from Finland and Germany was best and that bark from various types of

<sup>24</sup> To my knowledge these orchid blocks are not sold at present.

<sup>25</sup> Bagasse-like materials tend to decompose rapidly and become soggy in the bottom of the pot.

<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to see that potting mixes in Noble's book are based more on root size than genera. Most authors do not mention roots in their discussions of media. Prior to this time only Johnson (1974) had mentioned root size in relation to bark particle size.

European pines and redwood from the United States were used as components. The compost used successfully at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, England, consisted of:

- 3 parts medium grade moss peat
- 3 parts supercoarse grade perlite
- 2 parts medium grade pine bark (7–13 mm size)
- 1 part charcoal (7 mm grade).

To each liter of this mix 4 g of dolomitic lime are added.

She further stated that a more 'open' growing medium with larger grades of bark and charcoal is used for epiphytes and lithophytes.

Rentoul (1987) mentioned that "Most potting mediums can be changed to suit a number of genera. The ideal is to make up those which need the least modification to suit both specialist genera and the compatibles which may be benched with them." He further cautioned that every combination should be related to the environment in which it is used and that the dislike of any ingredient should be based on experience. Rentoul disliked charcoal because he felt it could be toxic<sup>27</sup>. Bark is cited as a good medium but should be the best available and in sizes or grades to suit the various genera. Rentoul suggested imported bark (source unknown) because it gave better results and had better water-holding capacity.

*Pleione*, according to Cribb and Butterfield (1988), will grow in a variety of media, but they limit their recommendations to two which have been very successful. Their preferred medium consists of (by volume):

- 6 parts of ungraded orchid bark with dust and fine particles (up to 5 mm) sieved out,
- 1 part coarse perlite
- 1 part sphagnum moss chopped into 6 mm lengths
- 1 part sphagnum moss peat which has been thoroughly broken up.

"This coarse medium is used in the bottom two-thirds of the pan. A similar less coarse grade is used above . . ." In their second mix charcoal, beech and oak leaves are used. The leaves are collected as soon as they fall and shredded before using. They further state that fibrous loam can be substituted for bark, but garden soil is most unsuitable.

Richards et al. (1988) describe some of the media used in the cultivation of Australian native orchids. They recommend a very simple mix for epiphytes consisting of two parts bark chips (fir or pine) and one part charcoal<sup>28</sup>. The

<sup>27</sup> When perusing the literature, in this case orchid development, it is not uncommon to find an article in which the author degrades or eliminates an ingredient (e.g., charcoal) that is widely used and highly praised by growers around the world.

<sup>28</sup> The use of common names for the bark chip sources is often confusing as pine in Australia will not necessarily be the same as a pine in the United States or Europe. In Australia *Casuarina* species are called pine, whereas in the United States and Europe the genus *Pinus* is commonly called pine. Therefore duplicating the exact medium is not always possible. It would be better to use the Latin (generic and specific) name of the tree.

basic mix for terrestrials is much more complicated. It consists of:

- 2 parts coarse sand
- 1 part rich loam
- 1 part buzzer chips (shavings from woodworking machines)
- 1 part leaf mold
- 1 dessert spoonful blood and bone per 9 liters bucket of mix
- 1 dessert spoonful of garden lime or dolomite per 9 liters bucket of mix

The mixture for tropical terrestrials is different and consists of:

- 2 parts leaf mold
- 1 part coarse sand
- 1 part aged pine bark (approx. 10 mm size)
- A little blood and bone meal

According to Stewart (1988) orchid composts play a dual role, in both supporting the plant in the container and providing a well aerated, moist medium. She also noted that composts used today (in England) are mixtures of natural materials, such as pine or fir bark, coarse grit, fibrous peat, chopped dry leaves or sphagnum and inert materials like perlite, perlag, pieces of horticultural grade charcoal and sometimes pieces of polystyrene. Mixtures vary among growers, but “two tried and tested compost mixes are given below.”

Basic epiphyte mix:

- 3 parts washed bark chips, medium grade
- 1 part coarse perlag
- 1 part charcoal, horticultural grade
- 1 part fibrous peat or broken leaves or chopped sphagnum

Basic mix for terrestrial orchids:

- 3 parts fibrous peat
- 2 parts coarse perlite
- 2 parts coarse grit
- 1 part charcoal, horticultural grade

Although these two mixes were ‘tried and tested’, Stewart suggests that they could be modified to suit individual orchids and/or grower situations. Genera or substitute ingredients were not listed. Suggestions for modifying the mixes were not provided.

As late as 1988, Fanfani and Rossi in a brief section on fertilization stated that “The growing medium most commonly used today is bark, with the addition of more or less inert materials (peat, sphagnum moss, foam rubber)<sup>29</sup> or of making it lighter (polystyrene, cork, pebbles) but none of these provides the plant with any food”<sup>30</sup>. Although bark was the component of a number of

<sup>29</sup> Peat and sphagnum are far from inert.

<sup>30</sup> Peat and sphagnum moss do supply some nutrients as they decompose.

commercial potting mixes when this was written, it was used in smaller amounts than those employed during its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s.

Hennessy and Hedge (1989) made several interesting comments before they listed growing media for *Paphiopedilum* plants. They researched the native habitats of *Paphiopedilum* species and found that there was “. . . one [obvious] aspect common to all. Their roots penetrate a light well-aerated substrate; they are never found growing in hard compact soils. There is always perfect drainage at their roots . . .” They also pointed out that a variety of potting media used in cultivation came close to equaling the number of *Paphiopedilum* growers and ranged from live sphagnum moss to complete formulae with numerous ingredients. Here again is a case where, despite the uniformity of growing conditions in their native habitat, *Paphiopedilum* species will grow in a wide variety of media. Hennessy and Hedge listed three formulas for growing *Paphiopedilum* plants:

General medium for mature plants:

- 5 parts conifer bark<sup>31</sup> (medium grade) 10–15 mm size
- 3 parts coarse peat
- 2 parts perlite (coarse grade)
- 1 part charcoal, 5–7 mm size
- To each 5 liters add 20 g dolomitic lime

Seedling medium

- 4 parts conifer bark (fine grade), 4–7 mm size
- 2 parts coarse peat
- 1 part perlite (medium grade)
- 1 part charcoal, 5–7 mm size
- To each 5 liters add 20 g dolomitic lime

Medium for epiphytes and some lithophytes

- 3 parts conifer bark (coarse grade), 15–25 mm size
- 3 parts conifer bark (medium grade), 10–15 mm size
- 1 part coarse peat
- 1 part super coarse perlite
- 2 parts charcoal, 10–20 mm size
- To each 5 liters add 20 g dolomitic lime

Writing on the culture of *Dendrobium* and other sympodial orchids grown in Asia, Teoh (1989) stated that the most widely used medium for plants in pots was broken charcoal, either alone or with broken bricks<sup>32</sup>. Their ratio is not

<sup>31</sup> Although no specific conifer bark is delineated in any formula, Hennessy and Hedge mention American redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) and some European *Pinus* species as the types of conifer barks used.

<sup>32</sup> Brick and charcoal have been the standard medium for almost 50 years in southeast Asia, a relatively long usage for any medium.

critical but is usually 4 to 1. The medium would depend on the location of the pots in the growing area. For example, if the pots were hanging from a lath frame, only charcoal would be used as the medium to lighten the load on the structure. In Thailand, according to Teoh, the bottom  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the pot is filled with crock. Vertical fibers of tree fern are placed in the remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the pot<sup>33</sup>. *Dendrobium* plants are placed on the medium after it has been trimmed flush with the top of the pot. The new roots can easily grow down among the vertical fibers. Monopodial orchids of the "*Vanda-Arachnis* Tribe" growing in pots were also covered by Teoh (1989). These robust plants should be grown in large clay pots (12" or 30cm) to provide proper support for the plants. Broken bricks fill up to  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the bottom of the pot (adding support) and then charcoal is added to within  $\frac{3}{4}$ " (2 cm) of the top of the pot. He also noted that Styrofoam, tree fern chunks, and redwood bark have been used as alternative media but have not been widely accepted in southeast Asia. Under the local climate conditions Styrofoam does not retain sufficient moisture, but the other two materials tend to become waterlogged<sup>34</sup>.

"Epiphytic orchids need excellent drainage and plenty of aeration around their roots. For this reason they cannot be grown in soil and must be potted in a coarse mix free of soil and other fine, clogging particles" (Jones, 1990). Having made that opening statement, Jones proceeded to list ingredients used for potting mixes in Australia. Softwood barks like pines, redwood and firs (the best bark is obtained from mature trees and is "nuggety or flaky"), osmunda, tree fern and *Polypodium* fern fibers, staghorn peat, sphagnum, peanut shells and leaf mold were the organic materials listed. Charcoal was listed as also being widely used. Inorganic ingredients listed were coarse sand, gravel, grit, blue metal (no description given as to what the material was), scoria, stone chips, terracotta and brick shards. Limestone chips were suggested as a material to incorporate in *Paphiopedilum* mixes, as these plants are often found growing on limestone in their native habitat. Jones did not provide the reader with a list of mixes, but noted that "there are nearly as many mixes as there are orchids." He did note, as a guide only, one useful mix for epiphytes. It consisted of:

- 4 parts bark
- 2 parts charcoal
- $\frac{1}{2}$  part peanut shells or tree fern fiber

<sup>33</sup> I have personally observed chopped pieces of coconut husks used in Thailand with their fibers vertical.

<sup>34</sup> Since tree fern and redwood have been used successfully elsewhere in the world it appears that adjusting watering practices might solve the problems with tree fern and redwood. If the plants are grown in the open, increasing the drainage capacity of the containers should solve the problem as both materials drain readily.

Jones listed two mixes for terrestrial orchids<sup>35</sup>:

	Mix 1	Mix 2
loam	1 part	–
sand	3 parts	1 part
leaf mold	1 part	1 part
fern fiber	1 part	1 part
sphagnum moss	–	1 part

“New Zealand sphagnum moss has long been known as an ideal medium into which deflasked orchids can be planted, for propagation of back-bulbs, and for developing roots on orchids” (Murphy, 1990). He considered it superior to Australian sphagnum moss, and reported it was widely used in Hawaii, Taiwan and Japan. Murphy expresses concern over the high cost and problems of storing quantities of New Zealand sphagnum moss. He was concerned that there might be contamination after the bales had been opened and also that the light weight of the material would make it hard to keep it under control. His concerns were modified when a pelletized form of the moss was developed. These tightly compressed pellets were easier to ship, required less storage space and made the moss less costly to import. They were not as messy in storage. All that was necessary was to rehydrate the pellets, and the moss reacted as normal sphagnum. His studies with orchid potting mixes showed New Zealand sphagnum moss to be a superior medium<sup>36</sup>.

In a detailed article on orchid media judywhite<sup>37</sup> (1990) stated that “The two things a potting material must do after giving an orchid plant support in a pot are to 1) allow plenty of air to the roots and 2) allow water to run past the roots freely rather than let it stand around them to suffocate and rot, while still retaining enough moisture for the plant’s needs.” The author also describes in depth 15 commercially available potting materials, namely fir bark, redwood bark, tree fern, sphagnum moss, osmunda, cork, peat moss, charcoal, Styrofoam, rockwool, perlite, stones, lava rock, expanded shale and vermiculite. In the descriptions properties such as water-holding capacity and pH were given for some of the materials. Only in the description of rockwool is there any mention of genera that could or should be grown in any of the components. No component mixtures were mentioned. judywhite pointed out that the Eric Young Foundation bases their potting mix particle on the root diameter of the plant to be potted. This method of basing mix particle size on root diameter was described earlier by Johnson (1974) and Noble (1987) and still is not commonly used.

<sup>35</sup> There was no indication whether different terrestrial genera require different mixes or whether both mixes are good for all genera.

<sup>36</sup> New Zealand sphagnum moss is an excellent, clean, long-fiber moss when compared with sphagnum moss from many other locations.

<sup>37</sup> *Sic.* The author, whose name is Judy White should be cited as ‘White (1990)’, but she insists on this unique citation format. The format ‘judywhite, 1990’ is also used in the references.

Hodgson et al. (1991) were very specific about the size of the particles of the potting ingredients for epiphytic orchid species, details lacking in many articles on potting mixes. They also pointed out that "Epiphytic orchids require adequate ventilation and drainage around their roots." Therefore, they proposed that the medium for *Cattleya*, *Dendrobium*, *Phalaenopsis* and *Vanda* plants should be composed of chunks of potting material 2.5 cm (1") thick for 10–15 cm (4–6") pots. In smaller pots the particles should be smaller and for larger pots they recommended 3–4 cm (1½–2") chunks. The mix they recommended consisted of:

- 5 parts 'sterilized' pine bark
- 1 part rock
- 1 part charcoal

"Terrestrial species require much more moisture around the roots." Here, too, the potting mixture is much heavier. They recommended a mixture of "sterilized conifer bark or artificial, coarse compost medium, sphagnum and rice hulls or fine grade bark." Unfortunately no amounts were given for the various components in the medium nor were there descriptions of the sterilized conifer bark and fine grade bark. Hence duplicating this medium would be difficult, and the results might not be as gratifying as one might expect, but at least they discussed particle size.

Interesting comments on potting media were made by Leroy-Terquem and Parisot (1991) in their book on orchid cultivation. In it they noted that some growing media are still as popular today as they were in Lindley's time (approx. 1860). They recommended the use of fragments of terracotta and pieces of charcoal for growing vandas. The authors stated that this compost . . . "one of the best possible for such plants (provided they are well fertilized), has recently caused the death of orchids potted in it. This happened because the charcoal had been treated to render it more flammable for barbecues and the roots reacted to the chemical used. So great care still has to be exercised in choosing and purchasing ingredients." The authors then listed the characteristics to consider in preparing a good orchid compost. They included:

1. There should be free air movement.
2. Components should have good drainage yet hold sufficient moisture for good growth.
3. They should withstand decomposition as long as possible.
4. It must offer the roots good opportunity to adhere.
5. It should promote ionic exchange between the water and roots.
6. It should deter the development of fungi and microbes.

These are similar to guidelines given by other authors but expressed somewhat differently. They do not list specific mixtures, only ingredients, and state that "the composition of the compost, although important, is not the sole determining factor in the successful cultivation of orchids. Success depends much

more on a sensible balance and combination of all these factors.” In addition to the standard ingredients mentioned by most authors they added a ‘polyurethane moss.’ This material is “a fairly new ingredient, this moss is quite resistant to decomposition, retains water well and only releases it slowly to the exterior, so it helps to ensure an adequate moisture content within the compost.” Nothing is mentioned about the size, shape or color of the ‘moss’<sup>38</sup>.

Bechtel et al. (1992) stated “Orchids are relatively versatile plants and will tolerate a wide variety of growing media. Often local conditions dictate the composition of the growing medium used.” Further they stated that epiphytes are more tolerant than terrestrials, adding that “a few epiphytes (no names given) will grow quite happily suspended in air on a piece of string while others will grow attached by thread or wire to a slab of cork bark.” They listed three basic composts and noted that if a grower had difficulty locating some of the ingredients “with a little thought, an effective local substitute can easily be found.” The composts were:

A. Basic mix for all epiphytes and some terrestrials.

- 6 parts of coniferous bark
- 1 part perlag or pumice
- 1 part coarse peat
- 1 part charcoal

This medium can be made up in three grades of bark: particle size 1–3 mm, 4–6 mm and 7–12 mm depending on pot size.

B. For terrestrial orchids.

- 1 part peat
- 1 part loam
- 1 part sand

C. A fine version of Compost A.

- 3 parts peat
- 6 parts bark

Live sphagnum moss can be added (when available).

No genera were listed in the section on composts. However, throughout the book after most generic descriptions, one of the three composts was listed (e.g., *Acacallis* – Compost A, *Disa* – Compost C and *Phaius* – Compost B or C).

Schoser (1993) suggested that the substrate must allow air and water to move through but also should be able to retain moisture. He further states that “all natural substrates can be used: dried fern roots, peat moss and shredded bark. People also use artificial fibers, perlite of different origins, sandy

<sup>38</sup> It is possible that this moss might have been similar to the small Oasis blocks offered in the United States as a possible growing medium. These small green plastic blocks were similar to those used in the florist industry and held water. Unfortunately, like many potential media components, they did not develop into a much sought-after medium.

loam, charcoal and fall leaves.” Schoser listed five potting mixes:

1. Fern root as base:

- 3 parts fern root
- 3 parts fibrous moss
- 3 parts rigid foam beads
- 1 part charcoal (3–8 mm in diameter)

This is modified for epiphytes by adding additional fern roots and beads (no amounts mentioned). For terrestrials the fibrous moss is replaced by sandy loam or peat moss.

2. Peat moss as base:

- 3 parts peat moss
- 3 parts pumice stone
- 3 parts rigid plastic foam beads
- 1 part charcoal.

Add a teaspoon (2 g) of calcium carbonate for each quart (liter) of mix.

3. Fir bark as base is heavy in fir bark:

- 5 parts fir bark (small chips for orchids)
- 2 parts pumice stone
- 2 parts peat moss
- 1 part charcoal

A teaspoon (2 g) of calcium carbonate per quart (liter) is added to this mix.

4. Lumpy, commercial peat moss as base:

- 1 part lumpy peat moss
- 1 part rigid plastic foam beads.

5. Orchid chips:

This text states that the beads or chips are made by a special process that uses steam. The surface of the beads or chips is rough, and all kinds of orchids can be grown in it. Several advantages are listed for this material, but no information is given as to its chemical background. A picture accompanying the text shows thin white strips which one assumes are the ‘chips’<sup>39</sup>.

Schoser states that mix 1 is good for *Paphiopedilum*, but it is necessary to add 2 teaspoons (2 g) of calcium carbonate for every 2 quarts (liters) of mix. *Phalaenopsis*, *Oncidium* and *Lycaste* grow well in mix 2. Mix 3 is ideal for epiphytes growing in flower pots. The fourth is recommended for *Phalaenopsis*. No specific genera are listed for mix 5. There is only a general statement that all kinds of orchids can be grown in it. From this one would assume that both epiphytes and terrestrials can be grown in mix 5.

The present situation of potting media was summarized briefly by Pridgeon (1992) when he stated that for epiphytes in the past, osmunda was

<sup>39</sup> Other authors have used the term ‘orchid chips’ to denote larger plastic slabs (Bomba, 1957).

the medium of choice, but when supplies ran out other media were sought, both organic and inorganic. Today, tree fern and fir bark are the basic ingredients of most media. They are found in a wide variety of combinations with perlite or pumice, charcoal, redwood bark, sphagnum, lava rock, and cork. These are not the only ingredients because depending on the locale native ingredients may be substituted for those mentioned above. When considering terrestrials, Pridgeon cited loam, coarse sand and leaf mold, with traces of bone and blood meal as the basic constituents of media. Throughout the book he or various contributors give specific media recommendations for a variety of genera (e.g., *Calypso*: “the plants need an open mix of leaf mold with crushed quartzite grit or alternately, living sphagnum moss to survive”).

From Australia, Jim and Barbara McQueen have given interesting insights on media being used there for miniatures (1992). They pose the question “And what materials should be used for potting and mounting? It really doesn’t matter too much. It is obviously sensible to use materials which are cheap and readily available locally.” In their conditions and locality, they use tree fern mounts for most miniatures. A mixture of tree fern and fresh sphagnum is used for plants grown in pots. They also employ sheoak (*Casuarina*) needles and seed capsules. This material is ideal for coarse rooted plants, such as *Vanda* and *Aerides*, as the material holds some moisture and is well aerated. Paper bark (*Melaleuca*) limbs and limbs sawed in sections, although slightly heavy, make some of the finest mounts for growing orchids. The McQueens found paper bark to be an ideal mount for *Sophranitella violacea*, a plant that is considered hard to grow outside its native habitat. In the case of those epiphytes that “prefer drier conditions” (e.g., *Cattleya*) cork bark is the preferred material. Their adaptation and use of local materials is commendable and also indicates the wide array of materials that have proven to be successful media for epiphytic orchids. In 1993, The McQueens listed similar components to be used in growing Brazilian orchids.

Rhodehamel (1993) “suggests that the grower employ basically the same type of potting mix for all masdevallias in the collection (and for other genera as well).” He suggests two bark mixes:

Mix 1:

- 4 parts fine fir bark
- 2 to 3 parts tree fern
- 2 to 3 parts charcoal
- 1 part perlite
- 1 part chopped sphagnum moss

Mix 2:

- 4 parts fine fir bark
- 3 parts tree fern
- 3 parts charcoal
- 1 part perlite

Rhodehamel found these to be good media for plastic pots but stated that they dried out too fast in clay pots. He also recommended a straight sphagnum moss medium and a mixture of sphagnum moss and tree fern (3:1) which can produce good plants. The latter works well in clay pots. He found New Zealand sphagnum moss to work particularly well.

During the past few years, a new potting medium, rockwool, has been making inroads in the orchid potting medium market. Rockwool has been used for a long time as an insulating material for buildings. At present there are two types, one that repels moisture and one that holds it. Consequently, a grower can control the amount of moisture in the pot by mixing various amounts of the two types of rockwool. Even more recently an almost pelleted form of rockwool has been developed (personal observation). The pellets are about the size of pea gravel. So far root development has been excellent, and only time will tell whether rockwool or rockwool pellets will become a common medium for orchid growing. Since rockwool is inert it can be sterilized and reused. New Zealand sphagnum moss has also proven to be a very fine potting medium. It has been an excellent medium for *Phalaenopsis* in our greenhouse. It is the best sphagnum moss on the market, but unfortunately its high cost has deterred widespread use. Recently I was given two bags of shredded automobile tires, which were being used as an orchid medium. Only time will tell how this material will work or what other interesting innovations in potting mixes will arise.

### **Final thoughts**

Despite the trials and tribulations of many orchid growers and researchers the 'one best medium for epiphytic orchids continues to elude us'. It becomes very obvious that despite the variety of media tried and successfully used over the decades no single material is as widely used today as osmunda was during its heyday from the 1920s through the 1950s. Each grower has a special ingredient or ingredients added to personalize the medium. Throughout this review on orchid potting a large number of different media have been described which contained an equally large number of components. These media have all been successfully used in many areas of the world. This tends to emphasize a point stated earlier by this author that "epiphytic orchids will grow in any medium except soil as long as you adjust your watering and fertilizing practices to the medium in hand." Also, as far as terrestrials are concerned, an equally broad statement can be made. Terrestrials can be grown in any medium that contains at least 40% or more organic matter. The picture as far as orchid potting mixes are concerned will continue to evolve. New and possibly more interesting combinations of ingredients will appear. Perhaps another 'osmunda' (some synthetic material) will be found to which growers will flock.

There will be times when a grower will try to develop his/her own potting mixture, and if he/she does there are certain points to keep in mind. In order to

produce a good potting mix the following considerations must be taken into account:

1. It must hold moisture yet be well drained.
2. It should contain some organic matter.
3. It should supply some nutrients.
4. It should support the plant.
5. It should maintain its physical structure for at least two years.

The availability and cost of the material is also important. There is no sense putting a mix together and then finding out that one or more of the components is no longer available. Granted, inert materials can also be used, but they require adjustments as far as fertilization is concerned as they do not always have the same buffer capacity as organic materials.

## Glossary

**Bark.** A by-product of the lumber industry. Mostly the bark of fir trees collected during the debarking of logs at the saw mill.

**Charcoal.** A black, very lightweight substance made by partially burning wood.

**Coke.** A bituminous coal product, lighter in weight and more porous than standard hard coal.

**Dirt.** The common name applied by nonagriculturists to most soils.

**Fiber.** Thread-like parts of plant tissue.

**Fibrous loam.** Loam soil containing fibers or partially decomposed plant parts.

**Fibrous peat.** Peat moss wherein fibrous material is still evident.

**Fines.** Dust-like or small particles that will pass through a  $\frac{1}{8}$ " by  $\frac{1}{8}$ " screen.

**Fish manures.** Any manure or fertilizer derived from the waste products of the fishing industry.

**Hapuu.** Hawaiian name for tree fern.

**Haydite.** A lightweight inert aggregate that holds water.

**Leaf mold.** The common name applied to partially decomposed leaves.

**Living sphagnum moss.** Live plants of species of *Sphagnum* moss often collected from stream banks and used in the living state as a potting medium or top dressing.

**Loam.** A type of soil composed of sand and clay, usually containing some organic matter. Considered a good garden soil.

**Lomite.** Subcharcoal kiln roasted bark chips.

**Mold.** An early term used to describe leaf mold.

**Moss.** The common term used for peat moss, sphagnum moss and any other moss.

**Osmunda.** A fern native to eastern United States. The black wiry or soft brown roots of this plant were used by orchid growers as the medium of choice for many years.

**Osmunda fiber.** The roots of the *Osmunda* fern.

**Osmundine.** Another term for the roots of the *Osmunda* fern.

**Peat.** A common name for peat moss.

**Peat moss.** The soft brown substance formed when plants partially decay, usually under water. The more decayed the plant material the more water it holds.

**Perlite.** A lightweight, white, inert, aluminum silicate aggregate used in potting mixes to lighten the mix and increase aeration and drainage.

**Pot shards.** Broken pieces of clay pots. Also often used to describe small pieces of broken bricks.

**Sharp sand.** Small sand particles with sharp edges. Also known as builders sand.

- Shell grit. Ground-up shells, mainly oyster, a product used by the poultry industry.
- Silver sand. Any white sand, often pure quartz, used by some as another term for sharp sand.
- Sod. Squares or rectangles of lawn or pasture grass usually with an inch (2.5 cm) of soil attached.
- Sodded loam. Loam soil obtained from a sodded field where the sod has been plowed under a week or two before the soil was collected.
- Solite. A lightweight, inert aggregate used in the cement industry. Used as a potting medium by some growers.
- Sphagnum moss. Mosses of the genus *Sphagnum*, used either live or dried as a potting mix.
- Soot. The fine black, often somewhat oily, material obtained when cleaning chimneys. This material was more available in Europe when soft coal was the main source of heating.
- Styropor. A form of expanded polystyrene (plastic).
- Turfy loam. Another term for sodded loam.

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## Contents of previous volumes

### ***Orchid Biology: Reviews and Perspectives, Volume I, 1977***

1. A Personal View of Orchids  
*Richard E. Holtum*
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*Rudolf Schmid and Marvin J. Schmid*
  3. Orchids in Rumphius' *Herbarium Amboinense*  
*Hendrik C. D. de Wit*
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*Michael B. Slaytor*
  5. Anthocyanins of the Orchidaceae: Distribution, Heredity, Functions, Synthesis, and Localization  
*Joseph Arditti and Michael H. Fisch*
  6. Vitamin Requirements and Metabolism in Orchids  
*Joseph Arditti and Charles R. Harrison*
  7. Variations in Clonal Propagation  
*Thavorn Vajrabhaya*
- Appendix: Clonal Propagation of Orchids by Means of Tissue Culture –  
A Manual  
*Joseph Arditti*

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*Chen Sing-chi and Tang Tsin*
3. Orchid Mycorrhiza  
*Geoffrey Hadley*

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*Norris H. Williams*
  5. Carbon Fixation in Orchids  
*Popuri Nageswara Avadhani, Chong Jin Goh, Adisheshappa Nagaraja Rao, and Joseph Arditti*
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*Hugh A. Poole and Thomas J. Sheehan*
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*Chong Jin Goh, Michael S. Strauss, and Joseph Arditti*
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*Joseph Arditti, Mark A. Clements, Gertrud Fast, Geoffrey Hadley, Goro Nishimura, and Robert Ernst*

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1. Orchids: Their Innocent Past, Their Promising Yet Perilous Future  
*Rebecca Tyson Northen*
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*Leonard J. Lawler*
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*Albert Stoessl and Joseph Arditti*
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*Joseph Arditti and Robert Ernst*
5. Carbohydrates of the Orchidaceae  
*Robert Ernst and Eloy Rodriguez*
6. Toxic and Allergenic Orchids  
*Björn M. Hausen*
7. A Reassessment of the Sectional Limits in the Genus *Cymbidium* Swartz  
*Christopher J. Seth and Phillip J. Cribb*

Appendix: Chromosomes in Orchids: Counting and Numbers  
*Ryuso Tanaka and Haruyuki Kamemoto*

***Orchid Biology: Reviews and Perspectives, Volume IV, 1987***

1. Orchidology in Southeast Asia: A History  
*Arthur George Alphonso*
  2. Major Patterns and Processes in Orchid Evolution: A Critical Synthesis  
*David H. Benzing*
  3. Pollination of *Orchis* and Related Genera: Evolution from Reward to Deception  
*Amots Dafni*
  4. Orchid Stomata – Structure, Differentiation, Function, and Phylogeny  
*Hanne Rasmussen*
  5. The Velamen and Exodermis of Orchid Roots  
*Alec M. Pridgeon*
  6. Development of Pollen and Accessory Structures in Orchids  
*Edward C. Yeung*
  7. Respiration in Orchids  
*Choy Sin Hew*
- Appendix: Orchid Diseases – A Compendium  
*Geoffrey Hadley, Mastura Arditti, and Joseph Arditti*

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*Frits W. Went*
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*Kingsley W. Dixon, John S. Pate, and John Kuo*
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*Russell Sinclair*
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*Paul M. Catling*
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*Leonid V. Averyanov*

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*Martha W. Hoffman Lewis*

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*T. M. Czerevczenko and I. V. Kosakovskaya*

Appendix: Flowering Months of Orchid Species under Cultivation

*Robert M. Hamilton*

***Orchid Biology: Reviews and Perspectives, Volume VI, 1994***

1. Long-Long Misis Bilong Plaua

*Andrée N. Millar*

2. History of Orchids in Europe, from Antiquity to the 17th Century

*Pierre Jacquet*

3. Interactions Between Orchids and Ants

*Rod Peakall*

4. Resupination

*Robert Ernst and Joseph Arditti*

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*Popuri Nageswara Avadhani,  
Helen Nair, Joseph Arditti, and Choy Sin Hew*

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*Choy Sin Hew*

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*Dorte E. Christensen*

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Joseph Arditti, and Choy Sin Hew*

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# Index of Persons

**Boldface** numerals denote illustrations.

- Abe, K., 32, 38, 39, 57–61, 64, 65, 68, 69  
 Abe, Y., 211  
 Abernethy, T., 167  
 Ackerson, C., 337, 360  
 Aesop, 4  
 Afanas'ev, I. B., 276, 279  
 Afzelius, K., 31, 33, 57, 59, 60, 64, 69  
 Agren, J., xxvi  
 Aiton, W. T., 214, 279  
 Albert, V. A., 85, 111  
 Alconero, R., 148, 166  
 Alexander, C., 126, 166  
 Allerton, S., 16  
 Alphonso, A. G., 365  
 Alvarez, M. R., 51, 64, 69, 76, 77, 82, 90, 111  
 Amaki, W., 306, 310, 311, 313  
 Amemiya, K., 207  
 Amore, T. D., 92, 111, 113  
 Amundsen (polar explorer), 4  
 Andersen, T. F., 130, 132, 166  
 Andersen, T.-H., 167  
 Anderson, N., 361  
 Anderson, R., 281  
 Ando, T., 206, 310  
 Ann, K. H. K., 335, 360  
 Anonymous, 264, 269, 270, 275, 276, 279  
 Anthony, R. G., 91, 113  
 Anzai, H., 102, 111  
 Aoki, M., 194, 210, 211  
 Aoyama, M., 196, 206, 207  
 Araki, T., 168  
 Ardititi, Belina, 3  
 Ardititi, Benjamin, 2  
 Ardititi, J., vi, vii, xv, xxi, xxiv–xxviii, 1, 17, 75, 76, 91, 93, 97, 107, 111, 113, 115, 117, 166, 205, 206, 231, 265, 270, 278, 282, 363–366, **xxviii**, 3, 15  
 Ardititi, J. (Grandfather), 3  
 Ardititi, J. O., xxiii, xxiv, 1, 5, 27–29, 3  
 Ardititi, Mastura, 26, 27, 365  
 Ardititi, Mordehai, 2, 4, 8–11, 13, 3  
 Ardititi, R., ii, 2, 4, 8–11, 13, 3  
 Ardititi, S. J., 1, 2, 4–6, 8–11, 13, 3  
 Ardititi, T., see Ardititi, Mastura, 69  
 Arduino, P., 114  
 Arekal, G. D., 57, 64, 69  
 Argumuganathan, K., 112  
 Arp, G. K., 346, 347, 360  
 Asahira, T., 305, 310  
 Asai, N., 205  
 Asai, S., 208  
 Asehara, T., 301, 311  
 Avadhani, P. N., xiii, xiv, xviii, 19, 23–25, 93, 94, 112, 197, 205, 366  
 Averyanov, L. V., 365  
 Awashima, M., 212  
 Bach, J. S., 4  
 Bacher, J. G., 331, 360  
 Bachmann, K., 112  
 Badwey, J. A., 276, 279  
 Baerlocher, F., 164, 166  
 Bai, L., 232, 236–238, 242, 243, 245, 246, 265, 279, 283  
 Ball, E. A., 21  
 Banerji, M. L., 269, 279  
 Banks, J., 318  
 Baranov, P. A., 31, 69  
 Barry, K., 107, 112  
 Bassett, E. N., 168  
 Batchelor, S., 347, 360  
 Bateman, J., 279, **216**  
 Bateman, R. B., 334, 360  
 Battaglia, E., 61, 69  
 Bayley, I., 336, 360  
 Bean, W., 322–324, 362  
 Bechtel, H., 355, 360  
 Bednara, J., 39, 40, 42, 43, 46, 49, 51, 52, 65, 68, 69, 71, 72, **43**, **44**  
 Beethoven, L., van, 4  
 Begum, A. A., 288, 310  
 Benner, M. S., 106, 112  
 Bennett, M. D., 112  
 Bensky, D., 213, 214, 262, 264, 270, 272, 275, 276, 279, 280  
 Benzing, D. H., 365  
 Bernard, N., 122, 166, 278, 280  
 Berta, G., 170  
 Berubé, J. A., 136, 166  
 Bhandari, N. N., 50, 69  
 Bhatnagar, A. K., 32, 39, 46, 49, 50, 52, 70  
 Bierweiler, B., 112  
 Bills, G. F., 167  
 Bing, A., 12  
 Black, P. M., 346, 360  
 Blackman, S. J., 72  
 Blaisedel, D. J., 167  
 Bloom, A. D., 276, 282  
 Bomba, G., 317, 356, 360  
 Bonham, D. G., 111  
 Bonney, J., xxvi  
 Boris, former King of Bulgaria, 6  
 Borochoy, A., 114  
 Bouman, F., 31, 32, 69  
 Boutillier, G., 20  
 Bowen, B., 92, 112  
 Bowman, A., 327, 360  
 Boyle, L. M., Sr., 329, 360  
 Briscoe, T. W., 326, 360  
 Brommonschenkel, S. H., 113  
 Brown, G., 338, 342, 344, 360  
 Brown, R., 75  
 Brown, W. H., 31, 57, 58, 60, 69  
 Bui, A. Q., 71, 114  
 Bulgarian botanists, 7  
 Bullini, L., 114  
 Burberry, H. A., 320–322, 331, 360  
 Burgeff, H., 24, 119–122, 124–126, 145, 146, 151, 166, 167  
 Burke, J. L., 341, 360  
 Burpee, L. L., 139, 169  
 But, P. H., 272–276, 280  
 Butterfield, H. M., 330, 349, 360  
 Byrd, Admiral (polar explorer), 4  
 Cameron, K. M., 112  
 Campbell, W. A., 167  
 Campbell, E. O., 120, 146, 167, 271, 280  
 Canetti, E., 2  
 Cannibal, former, 7  
 Capesius, I., 77–82, 112, 114  
 Carlson, M. C., 56, 69  
 Carlsson, K., 70  
 Carmichael, J. W., 145, 169  
 Case, M. A., 88, 112  
 Castle, L., 322, 360  
 Catling, P. M., 365  
 Catoni, G., 146, 167  
 Cecchi, A. F., 32, 39, 40, 42, 52, 65, 69  
 Chamberlain, C. J., 69  
 Chambers, L., 17  
 Chamuris, G. P., 167  
 Chan, W. C. L., 281  
 Chan, Y. S., 112  
 Chang, C., 208  
 Chang, H. M., 272–276, 280  
 Chang, T.-H., 273, 280  
 Chang, W., 338, 342, 360  
 Chardard, R., 73  
 Chasan, R., 50, 69  
 Chase, M. W., 84–87, 90, 106, 113, **86**  
 Chaudry, P., 282  
 Chen, A. L., 280  
 Chen, K., 4  
 Chen, K. K., 270, 277, 280  
 Chen, S.-C., 265, 266, 268, 271, 272, 280, 363  
 Chen, W. H., 97, 103, 105, 106, 111–113  
 Chen, Y. W., 280  
 Cheng, S.-J., 282  
 Chi, C. S., 281  
 Chia, T. F., i, xiii, xxv, 97, 99–102, 107, 111, 112  
 Choi, C. W., 114  
 Choi, J. K., 114  
 Chow, S., 271, 272, 280  
 Christensen, D. E., 366  
 Chua, N. H., 91, 111, 112, 115  
 Chuman, S., 136, 169

- Chunwongse, J., 114  
 Chuo, S. K. C., 366  
 Chyatani, M., 211  
 Chyou, M. S., 112, 113  
 Cianchi, R., 114  
 Clark, W. D., 113  
 Clay, K., 167, **156**  
 Clegg, M. T., 83, 112, 113  
 Clements, M. A., 279, 364  
 Coccuci, A. E., 32, 33, 52, 53, 62, 68, 69, 63  
 Cole, H., Jr., 167  
 Coleman, A. W., 111  
 Confucius, 213  
 Cook, R. J., 168  
 Copernicus, 4  
 Corrias, B., 114  
 Corrigan, M. J. G., 361  
 Corti, E. F., 32, 39, 40, 42, 52, 65, 69  
 Costantin, J., 139, 167, 325, 360  
 Coulter, J. M., 69  
 Cox, A. V., 87  
 Cribb, P. J., 111, 348, 349, 360, 364  
 Cruickshank, R. H., 169  
 Cubeta, M. A., 136, 167  
 Currah, R. S., vii, xiii, xv, xxiv, xxv, 1, 117–120, 122, 123, 135, 139, 141, 142, 146, 148, 150, 61, 162, 164, 167, 169, 170  
 Curtis, J. T., 33, 69, 118, 119, 121–126, 167  
 Czerevczenko, T. M., 366  
 Dafni, A., 365  
 Dalpé, Y., 162, 167  
 Dangel, J. L., 105, 113  
 Datodi, R., 362  
 Davidson, O. W., 323, 336–338, 344, 360  
 Davidson, R. W., 131, 167  
 Davis, G. L., 32, 69  
 De Angelis, G., 114, 115  
 de Vries, J. T., 205  
 de Wit, H. C. D., xxiii, 24, 363  
 Deng, S.-X., 274, 280  
 Dennis, R. W. G., 146, 167  
 Dessureault, M., 136, 166  
 Dillon, G., 361, 362  
 Dixon, K. W., 170, 365  
 Do, Y. Y., 96, 113  
 Dodson, C. H., ii, xix, xxii, xxvi  
 Doi, M., 210, 309, 310  
 Dominic (Dom), 12  
 Domsch, K. H., 164, 167  
 Dowling, J., 26  
 Downie, D. G., 119, 126, 167  
 Doyle, J. J., 85, 87, 113  
 Dreyfuss, M., 159, 161, 167, 169  
 Duan, J., 272, 280, 302, 306  
 Duan, J. X., 310  
 Dufour, L., 139, 167  
 Duncan, R. E., 33, 69  
 Dunn, A., 17  
 Dunsterville, E., 363  
 Dunsterville, G. C. K., 363  
 Duvall, M. R., 87, 113  
 Earle, E. D., 112, 114  
 Echandi, E., 167  
 Edison, T., 4  
 Edna, J. A.'s classmate, 9  
 Eguiarte, L. E., 113  
 Eichenberg, M., 13  
 Ellis, M. B., 158, 167  
 Ellowitz, R., 26  
 Endo, M., 196, 197, 204, 206  
 Eppley, P. J., 113  
 Ernst, R., xiii, 17, 19–21, 23, 25, 97, 112, 265, 270, 279, 280, 307, 311, 364, 366  
 Esau, K., 311  
 Estey, R. H., 145, 170  
 Falstad, C. H., 265, 280  
 Fanfani, A., 350, 360  
 Farr, D. F., 167  
 Fast, G., 279, 364  
 Feng, X. Z., 272, 280  
 Fennell, T. A., Jr., 336, 361  
 Fernando, A. A., 161, 167  
 Field, M., 26  
 Filippello Marchisio, V., 170  
 Fisch, M. H., 18, 363  
 Fischer, R. L., 32, 71  
 Fitting, H., 24  
 Flick, B. H., 93, 112  
 Fontana, A., 170  
 Forkmann, G., 91, 113  
 Forman, B. M., 331, 336, 360  
 Fowlie, J. A., 340, 344, 361  
 Franco, F., 6  
 Franksson, O., 70  
 Frary, A., 113  
 Frederick, R., 26  
 Fredrikson, M., 32, 49, 59, 69, 70  
 Freudenstein, J. V., 85, 87, 113  
 Fu, L. K., 271, 280  
 Fu, Y. M., 103, 112  
 Fujiwara, K., 313  
 Fujiwara, T. F., 347, 361  
 Fukai, S., 315  
 Fukuyama, H., 208  
 Furukawa, J., 208, 290, 303, 311, 313  
 Furuta, Y., 113  
 Furuya, M., 42, 70  
 Fuziwara, K., 187, 189, 210  
 Gagnepain, F., 268, 280, **226**  
 Galbraith, D. W., 113  
 Galileo, 4  
 Gallagher, S. R., 112  
 Gamble, X., 279, 280  
 Gams, W., 156, 167  
 Ganai, M. W., 114  
 Gandawijaja, D., 19, 20  
 Gauman, E., 121, 161, 167  
 Gaut, B. S., 113  
 Ghose, B. N., 361  
 Gibbon, M. J., 112  
 Glabe, C., 112  
 Glynn, I., 26  
 Goebel, K., 24  
 Goh, C. J., 19, 23, 113, 182, 201, 205, 206, 270, 280, 364  
 Goi, M., 180, 182, 183, 192, 206, 294, 311, 314, 315  
 Golden, W., 22  
 Golliker, D., 22  
 Gomi, K., 203, 206  
 Gonzalez, D., 147, 170  
 Gorska-Bryllass, A., 50, 71  
 Goss, S., 113  
 Goto, Y., 297, 311  
 Gounaris, E. K., 61, 70  
 Grazi, F., 61, 70  
 Griesbach, R. J., 92, 97, 104, 107, 113  
 Gu, Z., 20  
 Guilaumin, A., 268, 280, **226**  
 Gunning, B. E. S., 58, 72  
 Gustin, D. L., 70  
 Hackett, K. J., xxvi  
 Hadley, G., 25, 77, 115, 117, 119, 123, 125, 126, 150, 168, 170, 271, 279, 280, 364, 365  
 Hagen, P., 345, 361  
 Hagerup, O., 59, 70  
 Hahn, K., 115  
 Haig, D., 32, 58, 70  
 Haimowitch, M., 2  
 Halevy, A. H., 71, 111, 114, 280  
 Hall, I. R., 126, 168  
 Hamada, M., 120, 144, 167  
 Hambleton, S., vii, xv, 167, 169  
 Hamby, R. K., 113  
 Hamilton, R. H., 70  
 Hamilton, R. M., 366  
 Hammond, J., 113  
 Hara, M., 190, 191, 205, 206, 210, 211  
 Harkins, K. R., 113  
 Harley, J. L., 117, 167  
 Harling, G., 57, 70  
 Harris, J., 21  
 Harrison, C. R., 23, 363  
 Harvais, G., 119, 126, 168  
 Hasebe, H., 97  
 Hasebe, M., 115  
 Hasegawa, A., 182, 183, 192, 206, 294, 295, 311, 314, 315  
 Hashimoto, T., 280, **218**  
 Hashimoto, Y., 208  
 Hausen, B. J., 253, 254, 265, 267, 268, 270, 277, 280, 364  
 Hawkes, A. D., 267, 337, 361, **226**  
 Hawkinson, L. F., 337, 361  
 Hayakawa, J., 315  
 Hayashi, M., 206  
 Hayman, D. S., 132, 169  
 Healey, P. L., 20  
 Hedge, T. A., 351, 361  
 Henderson, J. L., 348, 361  
 Hendon, J., 114  
 Hennessy, E. F., 351, 361

- Herbert, W., 318  
 Herklots, G. A. C., 280, **220**, **222**  
 Heslop-Harrison, J., 34, 57, 70  
 Hetherington, E., 340, 361  
 Heuer, L. M., 344, 361  
 Hew, C. S., ix, xiii, xv, xxiv, 1, 19, 24, 112, 280, 281, 365, 366, **215**, **219**  
 Hiari, J., 312  
 Higuchi, H., 183, 190–193, 200, 201, 206, 210, 288, 306, 310, 311, 313  
 Hills, H. G., 85, 112, 113, 86  
 Hills, K. A., 231, 278, 280  
 Hirai, J., 291, 311  
 Hiraiwa, H., 305, 307, 311  
 Hiratsuka, Y., 169  
 Hitler, A., 6  
 Hjelmqvist, H., 59, 61, 70  
 Hjortstam, K., 144, 168  
 Hochberg, N., 13  
 Hodgson, M., 354, 361  
 Hoffman Lewis, M. W., 366  
 Hoffman, G. M., 136, 168  
 Hofmeister, W., 31, 70  
 Holguin, L., 338, 343, 361  
 Holliday, P., 158, 167  
 Holttum, R. E., 363  
 Honjo, T., 293, 311  
 Honma, Y., 301, 305, 311  
 Hooker, J., 317  
 Horak, E., 146, 167, 168  
 Hoshi, E., 311  
 Hsieh, R. M., 88, 89, 103, 112, 113, **89**, **90**  
 Hu, J. S., 107, 112  
 Hu, S. Y., 213, 214, 253, 255, 264, 266, 267, 269, 271, 272, 280, **220**, **222**, **227**  
 Huang, B.-Q., 32, 40, 46, 66, 70  
 Huang, H.-T., 281  
 Huang, P. L., 93, 96, 113  
 Huang, W. Y., 272, 280  
 Hubert, J. D., 331, 361  
 Hughes, S. J., 158, 168  
 Humboldt, A. von, 4  
 Hunt, P. F., 281, **218**  
 Hutchison, L. J., 146, 168  
 Ichihashi, S., viii, x, xiii, xv, xxiv, xxv, 1, 171, 185, 197, 203, 206, 207, 210, 265, 281, 291, 293, 300, 305–307, 311, 312  
 Ido, Y., 208  
 Idris, S., 20  
 Iida, A., 114  
 Ikegami, M., 114  
 Imadeki, M., 311  
 Imanishi, H., 192, 200, 210  
 Imazu, K., 180, 206  
 Imelda, M., 20  
 Inagaki, N., 208  
 Inohara, M., 290, 313  
 Inoue, K., 279, 282, 283  
 Inoue, N., 203, 211, 312  
 Inoue, T., 206  
 Inoue, Y., 192, 201, 206  
 Irawati (some Indonesians use only one name), 20, 24  
 Ishida, G., 200, 206  
 Ishido, F., 281, **221**  
 Ishiguro, Y., 206  
 Ishii, K., 111  
 Ishii, Y., 315  
 Islam, O., 205, 310  
 Isobe, K., 179, 206  
 Israel, H. W., 31, 32, 38–40, 42, 46, 70, 71  
 Ito, H., 200, 211  
 Iwase, N., 206  
 Jackson, G. V. H., 22  
 James, J. D., 107, 113  
 Jaquet, P., 366  
 Jarell, D., 112  
 Jensen, W. A., 32, 33, 46, 62, 69, 71  
 Jiang, Z.-Y., 273, 281  
 Johnson, E. R., 352, 361  
 Johri, B. M., 352, 361  
 Jones, D. L., 352, 361  
 Jones, W., 111  
 Jones, W. E., 78  
 Jonsson, L., 118, 144, 168  
 Jordan, B. R., 91, 113  
 judywhite (*sic*), 353, 361  
 Kadej, F., 50, 52, 71  
 Kadzimin, S., 104, 113  
 Kajihara, S., 196, 199, 206, 207  
 Kajima, T., 281, **218**  
 Kako, S.  
 Kako, S., 177–179, 182–185, 206, 207, 209, 211, 286, 287, 312  
 Kaku, K., 314  
 Kameko, H., 316  
 Kamemoto, H., xxv, 25, 75, 92, 111, 113, 115, 364  
 Kameya, T., 312  
 Kamuro, Y., 193, 208  
 Kanase, A., 287, 312  
 Kanda, K., 280, **218**  
 Kano, A., 198, 199, 207  
 Kano, K., 294, 299, 311, 312  
 Kano, N., 209  
 Kapil, R. N., 32, 39, 40, 46, 49, 50, 52, 64, 70  
 Kaplan, M., 12  
 Kapoor, M., 277, 281  
 Kaptchuk, T., 279, 280  
 Karanth, K. A., 57, 64, 69  
 Karnovsky, M. L., 276, 279  
 Kassam, S., 24  
 Katano, U., 206  
 Kataoka, K., 310  
 Kataoka, T., 282  
 Kataria, H. R., 136, 168  
 Kato, N., 203, 207  
 Kato, T., 279, 283  
 Katsuya, K., 170  
 Kawachi, M., 208  
 Kawai, A., 210  
 Kawamura, K., 310  
 Kawase, K., 299, 301, 312  
 Kellens, J. T. C., 147, 168  
 Kelman, J., 26  
 Kennedy, M., 26  
 Kerklots, G. A. C., **220**, 280  
 Kernohan, J., 111  
 Kim, K. W., 286, 287, 312  
 Kimura, C., 56, 70  
 Kimura, K., 265, 269, 281, **225**  
 Kimura, M., 315  
 Kimura, Y., 300, 301, 303, 308, 309, 312  
 Kindl, H., 107, 114, 182, 232, 241, 250, 265  
 King, D. O., 90, 111  
 Kinoshita, K., 316  
 Kinoshita, M., 211  
 Kiruhara, N., 300, 303, 309, 312  
 Kishimoto, H., 311  
 Klein, T. M., 92, 100, 113  
 Kluge, M., 197–199, 207  
 Knafut, R., 19  
 Knapp, S., 113  
 Knudson, L., 21, 300  
 Kobayashi, K., 170, 208  
 Kobayashi, M., 302, 305, 312  
 Kobayashi, S., 307, 312  
 Kofranek, A. M., 14, 15  
 Kohl, H. C., 15  
 Kojima, S., 312  
 Kokubu, T., 208  
 Komatu, Y., 212  
 Komatada, M., 312  
 Komori, A., 180, 182, 185, 207  
 Kono, T., 327, 361  
 Koopowitz, H., 85, 114  
 Koriba, K., 21, 23  
 Kosakovskaya, I. V., 366  
 Kosugi, K., 201, 208, 282  
 Kozai, T., 206, 293, 313  
 Kress, W. J., 113  
 Krikorian, A. D., 21  
 Kubota, S., 196, 199, 200, 202–204, 207, 208, 212  
 Kucey, R. M. N., 117, 168  
 Kuchii, E., 194, 202, 208  
 Kudlicka, K., 70, 71  
 Kuehnle, A. R., vii, xv, xxv, 75, 78, 97, 99, 100, 102, 104, 107, 114  
 Kullenberg, B., ii, xix, xxii, xxv  
 Kumura, M., 315  
 Kuo, J., 365  
 Kuras, M., 40, 71  
 Kurihara, N., 300, 301, 312  
 Kurita, S., 115  
 Kusano, S., 33, 64, 65, 70, 120, 168, 271, 281, **228–230**  
 Kusumoto, M., 281, 288, 290, 291, 313, **221**  
 Kwang Hsu, Emperor, 270  
 Lamoreaux, C., 24  
 Lanzara, P., 114, 115  
 Lassiter, J. H., 25  
 Launert, E., 360

- Law, S. K., vii, xv, 33, 34, 38, 40, 49–51, 54, 56, 57, 64, 70, 72  
 Lawler, L. J., 26, 257, 264–270, 272, 278, 281, 364  
 Lawson, R. H., 113  
 Leake, J. R., 170  
 Learn, G. H., Jr., 113  
 Leggett, M. E., 117, 168  
 Lemaire, C., 281, 277  
 Leonardt, K. W., 346, 361  
 Leroy-Terquem, G., 354, 361  
 Li, J., 70  
 Li, S. C., 214, 264, 281  
 Liang, S. C., 275, 281  
 Liang, Y. D., 281  
 Lin, C.-C., 266, 281, 313, 2676, **220, 222**  
 Lin, W. S., ix, xvi, 276, 277, 281, **223, 225**  
 Lin, Y. D., 272, 281  
 Lin, Y. S., 103  
 Linden, J., 319, 361  
 Lindley, J., 264, 269, 270, 281, 317, 354  
 Little, K., 338, 361  
 Liu, J., 255–257, 276, 281  
 Loddiges, Messrs, 214, 270  
 Loh, C., 113  
 London, J., 21  
 Loureiro, J., 214, 281  
 Lu, G. D., 281  
 Lu, M. J., 91, 93, 113  
 Lu, Z., 113  
 Luciano, A., 340, 361  
 Lüning, B., 265, 277, 281  
 Lysenko, T, 9  
  
 Machlis, L., xxiv, 1  
 Maeda, H., 211  
 Maekawa, F., 281, **216, 219**  
 Maekawa, S., 193, 208  
 Maheshwari, P., 56, 60, 70  
 Maheshwari, S. C., 46, 70  
 Mak, C. O., xxvi, 25  
 Mak, J., xxvi  
 Manor, P., 25, 26  
 Mansfield, J., 113  
 Martin, G. B., 105, 113  
 Marxmüller, H., 136, 168  
 Marzetti Mannina, F., 170  
 Masuda, M., 211  
 Masuhara, G., 170  
 Matkin, O. A., 329, 330, 336, 341, 361  
 Matsui, D., 114  
 Matsui, N., 208  
 Matsui, S., 193, 208  
 Matumoto, M., 212  
 Matuno, T., 206  
 McClure, J., 19  
 McGinnis, M. R., 129, 168  
 McGraith, G., 346, 361  
 McLellan, R. J., 331, 335, 336, 361  
 McQueen, B., 357, 361  
 McQueen, J., 357, 361  
 Mehliquist, G., 115  
  
 Melin, E., 162, 168  
 Merkel, N., 330, 361  
 Metzger, J., 264, 265, 282  
 Meudt, W. J., 70  
 Middleton, S., 26  
 Mieso, S., 26  
 Migo, H., 265, 269, **225**  
 Mii, M., 303, 305, 311, 315  
 Millar, A., 345, 361, 366  
 Miller [no initials given], 318  
 Minami, T., 315  
 Minegishi, N., 194, 202, 208  
 Mino, M., 315  
 Mituzaki, N., 315  
 Miwa, S., 187, 189, 193, 194, 208  
 Miyamoto, M., 327, 361  
 Miyazaki, T., 206  
 Miyoshi, R., 328, 361  
 Mizuguchi, T., 206  
 Mizuno, N., 207  
 Mizuta, Y., 310  
 Mo, Y.-J., 274, 280  
 Mohana Rao, P. R., 32, 56, 59, 60, 70, 72  
 Mohr, J. L., 16, 17, 21  
 Momiyama, A., 205  
 Momose, H., 200, 212, 293, 298, 299, 313, 316  
 Moore, R. T., 130, 146, 168  
 Morden, C., 87, 111  
 Mori, A., 255–257, 276, 281  
 Mori, N., 208  
 Morikawa, H., 103, 111, 114  
 Morioka, K., 198, 209, 210  
 Morita, M., 181–183, 208  
 Morrison, D. J., 169  
 Mott, R. C., 328, 334, 361  
 Mukhopadhyay, P., 282  
 Müller, E., 161, 169  
 Mulligan, R. M., 115  
 Mur, L. A. J., 113  
 Muraguchi, H., 315  
 Murakami, S., 169  
 Murakami, T., 139, 168, 182, 207  
 Murashige, T., 300  
 Murphy, W., 353, 361  
 Mussolini, B., 6  
  
 Nadeau, J. A., 31, 66, 70, 71, 93, 94, 114  
 Nagashima, T., 272, 281  
 Nagashiura, T., 315  
 Nagl, W., 77–83, 111, 112, 114, 115  
 Nair, H., xxvi, 19, 21, 112, 366  
 Naitou, M., 207  
 Nakagawa, S., 182, 192, 208  
 Nakagawa, T., 192, 210  
 Nakamura, S. I., 144, 168  
 Nakasone, K. K., 146, 168  
 Namba, T., 266–268, 281, **220, 222**  
 Nan, G. L., 97, 99, 100, 102, 103, 107, 111, 114, **101, 103**  
 Nansen, F. (polar explorer), 4  
 Narayanaswami, S., 60, 70  
 Natsume, M., 282  
 Neate, S. M., 150, 168  
  
 Needham, J., 263, 281  
 Neilson, D. R., 338, 362  
 Neusch, J., 167  
 Nieuwdorp, P. J., 126, 168  
 Niimi, Y., 290, 313  
 Niimoto, D., 115  
 Niitu, Y., 185, 207  
 Nimoto, D. H., 33, 70  
 Nishibuchi, N., 315  
 Nishida, M., 115  
 Nishikawa, K., 113  
 Nishimura, G., 201, 208, 279, 364  
 Nishimura, M., 315  
 Nishioka, M., 182, 183, 208  
 Noble, M., 328, 348, 362  
 Noguchi, H., 310  
 Noguchi, K., 315  
 Nojiri, C., 111  
 Nonami, H., 208  
 Northen, R. T., 325, 328, 334, 362, 364  
 Nuernbergk, E., 19  
 Nylund, J. E., 118, 144, 168  
 Nyman, L. P., 20–22, 24  
  
 Ochi, T., 202, 208  
 Oda, H., 310  
 Ogoshi, A., 141, 147, 170  
 Ohtsuki, T., 265, 282  
 Okamoto, T., 254, 255, 282  
 Oki, H., 313  
 Okuda, M., 208  
 Oliva, A. P., 280  
 Olmstead, R. G., 90, 112  
 Omar Khayam, 4  
 Omodera, K., 316  
 Onaka, T., 282  
 O'Neill, S. D., 32, 34, 66, 70, 71, 73, 93–95, 111, 114, 115, **94, 95**  
 Oniki, M., 136, 168  
 Ookawa, K., 207  
 Oonishi, Y., 297, 313  
 Oono, H., 183, 184, 205, 209, 211  
 Oosuga, M., 210  
 Oota, K., 197–200, 202, 203, 205, 209, 210  
 Oota, M., 208  
 Optl, J., 339, 362  
 Osmond, C. B., 197, 210  
 Oyamada, T., 290, 313  
 Oyanagi, Y., 276, 282  
  
 Pace, L., 31, 39, 56, 60, 71  
 Paine, R., 361  
 Palmer, J. D., 84, 86, 112  
 Parisot, J., 354, 361  
 Park, W. M., 114  
 Parker, L. T., 85, 114  
 Parmeter, J. R., Jr., 148, 169  
 Pate, J. S., 365  
 Paxton, J., 317  
 Peakall, R., 366  
 Peary (polar explorer), 4  
 Pegler, D. N., 169  
 Pennell, R. I., 31, 71

- Penningsfeld, F., 362  
 Perry, L. M., 264, 265, 282  
 Petch, T., 145, 169  
 Peterson, R. L., 169  
 Petrini, L., 169  
 Petrini, O., 159, 161, 167, 169  
 Peumans, W. J., 115, 147, 168  
 Phillips, J. M., 132, 169  
 Poddubnaya-Arnoldi, V. A., 33,  
     56, 58, 64–66, 71, 73  
 Poole, H. A., 343, 362, 364  
 Porat, R., 94–96, 114  
 Post, K., 15  
 Powell, N. H., 334, 362  
 Pradhan, P., 269, 279  
 Pradhan, U. C., 271, 282  
 Pray, T., 16  
 Pridgeon, A. M., vi, xvi, xix, xxiii,  
     xxiv, 1, 106, 111, 114, 356, 362,  
     365  
 Pridgeon, S., xxvi  
 Professor (elitist), Hebrew  
     University, 11  
 Prosina, M. N., 56, 71  
 Pu, X. G., 255–257, 283  
  
 Qian, Z. H., 272, 280  
  
 Raabe, R. D., 271, 282  
 Rachel, 12  
 Raffles, S., 28  
 Rafinesque, 264  
 Rao, A. N., xiii, xxiv, 19, 23–25,  
     60, 71, 205, 364  
 Rasmussen, H., 365  
 Rau, B., 14  
 Rau, J., 14, 15  
 Rau, M., 14, 15  
 Rau, W., 14, 15  
 Read, D. J.  
 Reavill, R., 25  
 Reeves, Mr., 270  
 Reichenbach, H. G., Jr., 264  
 Reid, D. P., 275, 282  
 Reinecke, T., 107, 114, 241, 250,  
     265, 282  
 Reinikka, M. A., 318, 362  
 Reiser, L., 32, 71  
 Rembert, D. H., Jr., 66, 71  
 Rembrandt, 4  
 Ren, L., 64, 71  
 Rentoul, J. N., 349, 362  
 Reyniers, J. P., 82, 111  
 Rhodehamel, W. A., 357, 358, 362  
 Richards, H., 349, 362  
 Richardson, K. A., vii, xvii, 117,  
     118, 120–125, 146, 158, 159, 161,  
     162, 164, 169  
 Richter, W., 343, 362  
 Rimpau, R. H., 167  
 Ringe, F., 313  
 Rishbeth, J., 136, 169  
 Ritter, C., 113  
 Rittershausen, B., 343, 362  
 Rittershausen, W., 343, 362  
 Rodder, J., iii  
 Rodkiewicz, R., 40, 42, 49–52, 71  
 Rodrigues, K. F., 161, 169  
 Rodriguez, E., 265, 270, 280, 307,  
     311, 364  
 Romero, G. A., xiii, xxiv, 1  
 Rorigues, K. F.  
 Rose, C. L., 277, 280  
 Rossi, W., 88, 114, 350, 360, **89**  
 Rossman, A. Y., 167  
 Rotor, G. B., 201, 210  
 Röttger, B., 115  
 Rubin, Mr. & Mrs., 13  
 Rücker, W., 77, 80–82, 112, 114  
 Rumphius, xxiii, 24  
 Russell, S. D., 32, 40, 46, 66, 70  
 Ryu, K. H., 111, 114  
  
 Sagawa, Y., 31–33, 38–40, 42, 46,  
     51, 71, 76, 111, 314  
 Sajise, J. U., 306, 314  
 Sakai, K., 178, 183, 186, 187,  
     192–194, 196, 206, 210  
 Sakakibara, K., 183, 184, 207, 209,  
     211, 311  
 Sakamoto, K., 316  
 Sakamoto, T., 303, 311, 316  
 Sakanishi, Y., 187, 189, 192, 200,  
     206, 210, 297–299, 301, 303, 314,  
     315  
 Sakuramoto, T., 185, 211  
 Salmia, A., 117, 120, 169  
 Samoto, K., 208  
 Samuels, G. J., 161, 169  
 Sanders, P. C., 167  
 Sanford, J. C., 113  
 Sano, Y., 282  
 Sasaki, H., 212, 313, 316  
 Sato, Y., 33, 60, 71  
 Saunders, P., 16–18, 23  
 Savina, G. I., 58, 71  
 Sawa, Y., 190, 192, 201, 210  
 Sawada, T., 310  
 Scacchi, R., 88, 114, 115  
 Schirmer, G., 327, 328, 362  
 Schirmer, L., 327, 328, 362  
 Schlechter, R., 214, 264, 282  
 Schlegel, M., 88, 115  
 Schmid, M. J., 363  
 Schmid, R., 363  
 Schnepf, E., 42, 71  
 Schoser, G., 24, 341, 355, 362  
 Schulz, P., 46, 71  
 Schweizer, D., 79, 80, 115  
 Scott (polar explorer), 4  
 Scott, B., 14  
 Scott, E. G., 16  
 Scott, R., 14, 15, 15  
 Seidenfaden, G., ii, xxi, xxvi, xxii,  
     214, 268, 282, **222, 225**  
 Senda, Y., 314, 315  
 Senghas, K., 361, 362  
 Seno, J., 316  
 Seshagiriiah, K. N., 39, 71  
 Sessler, G. J., 345, 362  
 Seth, C. J., 364  
 Shao, L., xxvi  
 Sharma, M., 32, 33, 38, 39, 46, 50,  
     52, 57–61, 71, 72  
 Sharp, L. W., 31, 57, 58, 60, 61, 72  
 Sheehan, T. J., x, xxv, 335, 343,  
     362, 364  
 Shekhar, N., 72  
 Sheng, N., 213  
 Sherman, D., 334, 362  
 Sherwood, R. T., 70  
 Shimazaki, K., 295, 296, 314  
 Shimizu, M., 282  
 Shinto, H., 297, 316  
 Sigler, L., 145, 167, 169  
 Silva, W., 338, 362  
 Simamoto, K., 189, 210  
 Simeon, Prince of Bulgaria, 6  
 Sinclair, R., 365  
 Singer, R., 146, 169  
 Sinoda, K., 187–194, 202, 210, 211  
 Siraishi, S., 314  
 Sivasithamparam, K., 170  
 Skoog, F., 300  
 Slaytor, M. B., 252–254, 270, 277,  
     282, 363  
 Smeets, K., 115  
 Smith, A. L., 362  
 Smith, J. E., 214, 282, **220**  
 Smith, J. F., 113  
 Smith, S. E., 125, 126, 168, 169  
 Smitinand, T., 268, 282  
 Smreciu, E. A., 139, 167, 169  
 Sneh, B., 130, 169  
 Snith, J. B., 112  
 Snodderly, D., 25  
 Soediono, Mr. (some Indonesian  
     use only one name), xxvi  
 Soediono, Mr. & Mrs., 20  
 Soediono, N. (Mrs.), xxvi, 21  
 Soltis, D. E., 88, 115  
 Soltis, P. S., 88, 115  
 Somemiya, Y., 207  
 Sood, S. K., 32, 56, 59, 60, 64, 70,  
     72  
 Soysa, E., 324, 325, 335, 362  
 Spatz, L., 276, 282  
 Spivey, R., 114  
 Stalpers, J. A., 130, 146, 166, 169  
 Stanley, H. M. (African explorer),  
     4  
 Steinbruck, G., 115  
 Stephens, G. C., 17, 18  
 Stewart, J., 348, 350, 361, 362  
 Steyaert, R. L., 169  
 Stiles, J., 111  
 Stobiecka, H., 40, 42, 71  
 Stoessl, A., ii, 18, 231, 278, 280,  
     282, 364  
 Storey, W. B., 92, 115  
 Strasburger, E., 31, 72  
 Strauss, M. S., 22, 23, 206, 280, 364  
 Su, H.-J., 342, 362  
 Sugi, Y., 196, 204, 206  
 Sugii, N., 97, 99, 100, 107, 111, 113  
 Sugimoto, Y.  
 Sugiura, M., 206

- Sugiyama, A., 184, 207, 211, 312  
 Sukarno, Indonesian President, 24  
 Sukshom Kasemsanta, M. R., 361  
 Sumida, S., 286, 293, 314  
 Sumitomo, A., 211  
 Summer, G. W., 327, 362  
 Suryadharma, H., xxvi  
 Suto, K., 186–188, 190, 193, 194,  
 197, 199, 202, 210, 211  
 Suzuki, S., 311  
 Swamy, B. G. L., 32–34, 39, 46, 56,  
 58, 65, 72  
 Sweetingham, M. W., 136, 169  
 Syamoto, R., 21  
 Syono, N., 211
- Taguchi, J., 315  
 Tahara, M., 310  
 Takagi, S., 233, 241, 244, 247, 248,  
 251, 265, 282, 283  
 Takahashi, M., 328, 362  
 Takakura, T., 293, 311  
 Takano, T., 290, 313  
 Takechi, K., 208  
 Takeuchi, S., 209  
 Talapatra, B., 255, 270, 282  
 Talapatra, S. K., 282  
 Talbot, P. H. B., 118–125, 139,  
 141, 142, 148, 151, 153, 170  
 Tamaki, M., 310  
 Tamashiro, M., 316  
 Tamura, H., 212  
 Tan, K. W., 214, 264, 282, 361, **220**  
 Tanaka, M., 111, 292, 294,  
 297–301, 303, 305, 306, 308, 309,  
 314, 315  
 Tanaka, R., 75, 364  
 Tanaka, S., 208  
 Tanaka, T., 97, 202–204, 206, 211  
 Tang, T., 265, 266, 268, 280, 363  
 Tang, Z.-Z., 282  
 Tanksley, S. D., 114  
 Tao, H. J., 213  
 Taylor, J. D., 113  
 Taylor, J. S., 66, 72  
 Taysum, D., 22  
 Tchaikovsky, P. I., 28  
 Telleria, M. T., 144, 168  
 Teoh, S. E., 351, 352, 362  
 Teramoto, G., 208  
 Terashita, T., 120, 124, 136, 148,  
 169  
 Terauchi, K., 212  
 Thomale, H., 300  
 Thunberg, C. P., 214, 282  
 Till, R., 26  
 Ting, I. P., 197, 207  
 Tiwari, S. C., 64, 70  
 Tohda, H., 33, 72  
 Tokuhara, K., 303, 305, 308, 309,  
 311, 315  
 Tomioka, Y., 286, 314  
 Tomita, K.-I., 283  
 Tong, S. H., 72  
 Torikata, H., 290, 295, 296, 315,  
 316
- Torrekens, S., 115  
 Toyoda, Y., 208  
 Treub, M., 24, 31  
 Tsai, W. T., 112, 113  
 Tsi, Z.-H., 265, 282  
 Tsuneda, A., 145, 164, 167, 169  
 Tutui, K., 190, 193, 197, 199, 205,  
 211  
 Twiggs, J., xxiii, 25  
 Tzean, S. S., 145, 170
- Uchimaru, F., 282  
 Ueda, H., 290, 295, 296, 315, 316  
 Uehara, Y., 291, 293, 312  
 Uemoto, S., 295, 296, 314, 316  
 Ueno, S., 212  
 Uesato, K., 288, 316  
 Uetake, Y., 141, 170  
 Ui, T., 168  
 Uragami, Y., 184, 211  
 Usui, T., 211
- Vacin, E. F., 300, 327, 328, 334,  
 362  
 Vajrabhaya, T., xxii, 75, 363  
 Valmayor, H. L., 282, 314, 342,  
 362, **218**  
 Van Damme, E. J. M., 107, 115  
 van der Merwe, C. N., 361  
 Van Lammeren, A. A. M., 69  
 Van Leuven, F., 115  
 van Went, J. L., 32, 72  
 Vermoesen, C., 60, 72  
 Vesque, 31  
 Victoria, Queen, 28  
 Vij, S. P., 32, 33, 38, 46, 50, 52,  
 57–61, 65, 71, 72  
 Vilgaly, R., 147, 167, 170  
 Vivian, A., 113
- Wang, C. J. K., 164, 170  
 Wang, F.-X., 64, 71  
 Warcup, J. H., 118–125, 139, 141,  
 142, 148, 150, 151, 153, 168, 170  
 Ward, H. M., 31, 72  
 Wardlaw, C. W., 42, 72  
 Warming, 31  
 Warne, R. E., 330, 362  
 Watkins, J. V., 324, 331–333, 352,  
 362  
 Watson, W., 322–324, 362  
 Weatherhead, M. A., 265, 282  
 Webb, M. C., 58, 72  
 Weir, B. S., 83, 115  
 Went, F. A. F. C., 24  
 Went, F. W., 24, 29, 300  
 Wheeler, L. C., 16  
 White, E. A., 323, 362  
 Whitney, H. S., 148, 169  
 Wilcox, H. E., 164, 170  
 Wilkins, J., 339, 362  
 Wilkinson, K. G., 117, 170  
 Willemse, M. T. M., 32, 40, 43, 46,  
 69, 72  
 Williams, B. S., 322, 324, 362  
 Williamson, B., 77, 115, 150, 170
- Wirth, M., 32, 72  
 Withner, C. L., 32, 72, 167  
 Wolf, E. D., 113  
 Wolff, H., 122  
 Wong, D. H., 169  
 Wong, F., 281  
 Wood, J. R., 113  
 Wooten, R., 362  
 Wu, C. C., 112, 113  
 Wu, M., 113  
 Wu, P., 213, 282  
 Wu, R., 113
- Xiao, G., 156, 170
- Yam, T. W., 107, 112, 115, 265,  
 282  
 Yamada, M., 328, 330, 362  
 Yamada, Y., 114  
 Yamagata, Y., 283  
 Yamaguchi, S., 255, 283  
 Yamaki, M., 231, 232, 234–236,  
 239–245, 249–251, 265, 282, 283  
 Yamamoto, (*Dendrobium*  
 breeders), 271  
 Yamamoto, Y., 209, 210  
 Yamanaka, T., 206  
 Yamane, M., 185, 211  
 Yamashita, M., 265, 281  
 Yang, J. S., 280  
 Yang, R. T., 283  
 Yang, Y. B., 255–257, 283  
 Yasugi, S., 38, 72, 287, 297, 316  
 Yazawa, S., 310  
 Ye, X. C., 275, 283  
 Ye, X. L., 32, 39, 40, 52, 54, 62, 72,  
 73  
 Yeong, C., 113  
 Yeung, E. C., vii, xiii, xvii, xxiv,  
 xxv, 33, 34, 38, 40, 49–51, 54, 56,  
 57, 64, 70, 72, 365  
 Yonai, S., 302, 305, 312  
 Yoneda, K., 192, 196, 200–204,  
 207, 208, 212, 293, 296, 298, 299,  
 301, 313  
 Yonemura, K., 210  
 Yoneyama, M., 315  
 Yong, H. H., 91, 115  
 Yoshida, T., 207  
 Yoshimoto, R., 315  
 Youngner, V., 15  
 Yukawa, T., 84, 85, 115, 84
- Zee, S. Y., 32, 39, 40, 54, 72, 73  
 Zelmer, C. D., vii, xvii, 118, 119,  
 121–124, 131, 135, 141, 142, 146,  
 167, 170  
 Zhang, S. X., 281  
 Zhang, X. S., 32, 34, 66, 70, 71, 73,  
 114, 115  
 Zhang, Z. J., 65, 73  
 Zheng, G. J., 65, 73  
 Zhou, J., 255–257, 272, 283  
 Zhou, X., 271, 272, 283  
 Zimmer, E. A., 113  
 Zinger, N. V., 64–66, 73

# Index of Organism Names

This index contains common, scientific, and regional names of orchids and other organisms. Scientific names (e.g., *Gastrodia elata*) and terms in languages other than English (examples: Mandarin, *Chin shih-hu*; Latin, *icones*; etc) are *italicized*. Other entries are in roman type. Taxonomic groupings above the generic level are in CAPITAL LETTERS (ORCHIDACEAE, for instance). **Boldface numerals** denote illustrations. The mycorrhizal fungi of orchids entries in Table 4-1 (pages 18–25) are not indexed in this index because they are already alphabetized. Spellings, nomenclatural combinations, terms, orchid names, taxonomic designation, and organism names that may seem erroneous, inconsistent, archaic, and/or unusual are historic, as they appear in the original literature, and/or represent preferences by the authors. This index was prepared with *Kindex*, a Shareware indexing program by Professor Emeritus A. Phillips Griffiths, 6 Brockley Rd., West Bridgford, Nottingham, NG2 5J4, U. K.; Telephone: 44-5-981-0319; e-mail: griff@apg.u-net.com. The program can be downloaded from several WWW Shareware sites or obtained from Prof. Griffiths for a registration fee of at least £10.00 (US\$15–20, depending on the exchange rate).

- Angraecum citratum*, 320  
*Abies concolor*, 331, 335  
*Abies grandis*, 335  
*Abies magnifica*, 335  
*Acacallis*, 355  
*Acacia melanoxylon*, 271  
*Acianthus*, 148  
*Acineta barkeri*, 320  
*Acineta denba*, 320  
*Acineta humboldtii*, 320  
*Aconitum coreanum*, 261  
*Acorus gramineus*, 260  
*Acremonium*, 127, 154, 156, 161  
*Acremonium killense*, **153, 154**  
*Acremonium strictum*, 156  
*Acropsis* sp., **86**  
*Acrogenospora*, **154, 155, 156**  
*Acropera armeniaca*, 320  
*Acropera loddigesii*, 320  
*Ada aurantiaca*, 320  
*Aerides*, 357  
*Aerides affine*, 320  
*Aerides crassifolium*, 320  
*Aerides crispum*, 320  
*Aerides crispum lindleyanum*, 320  
*Aerides crispum warneri*, 320  
*Aerides falcatum*, 320  
*Aerides houlletianum*, 320  
*Aerides lobbii*, 320  
*Aerides maculosum*, 320  
*Aerides odoratum*, 320  
*Aerides quinquevulnera*, 320  
*Aerides savageanum*, 320  
*Aerides virens*, 320  
**AERIDINAE, 84**  
*Aganisia cyanea*, 320  
**AGARICALES, 169**  
*Agrobacterium*, 107  
**ALLIACEAE, 87**  
*Allium cepa*, 49, 77  
**ALSTROEMERIACEAE, 87**  
*Alternaria*, 154, 158  
*Alternaria alternata*, **154, 155, 158**  
 American redwood, 351  
*Amerorchis rotundifolia*, **128, 129, 133, 138, 139, 147**  
*Amitostigma kinoshitae*, 69  
**ANGIOSPERMS, 69–72**  
*Angraecum articulatum*, 320  
*Angraecum eburneum*, 320  
*Angraecum fastuosum*, 320  
*Angraecum leonis*, 320  
*Angraecum sanderianum*, 320  
*Angraecum scottianum*, 320  
*Angraecum sesquipedale*, 320  
*Anguloa clowesii*, 320  
*Anguloa ruckeri*, 320  
*Anguloa uniflora*, 320  
*Ansellia africana*, 320  
**ANTHEMIDEAE, 70**  
**ANTHEMIDINAE, 70**  
*Anthurium*, xvi  
*Antidesma ghaerembilla*, 345  
*Appendicula reflexa*, **84**  
**APHYLLOPHORALES, 168, 169**  
*Apiospora montagnei*, **154, 155, 158**  
*Aporum*, **84**  
**APOSTASIOIDEAE, 87**  
*Arabidopsis*, 91, 113  
*Arabidopsis thaliana*, 58, 72, 113  
**ARACEAE, 169**  
*Arachnis-Vanda* tribe, 352  
*Aranda*, 91, 96  
*Arisaema amurense*, 261, 262  
*Arisaema consanguineum*, 261, 262  
*Arisaema japonicum*, 261, 262  
*Armillaria*, 134, 135, 145, 168, 169, 282  
*Armillaria borealis*, 136  
*Armillaria bulbosa*, **128, 129, 136**  
*Armillaria calvescens*, 166  
*Armillaria gemina*, 166  
*Armillaria lutea*, 136  
*Armillaria mellea*, 135, 136, 166, 168, 169, 271, 273, 274, 281, 282  
*Armillaria tabascens*, 136  
*Armillariella tabescens*, 169  
*Arpophyllum giganteum*, 320  
*Arthrimum*, 153, 154, 156, 158  
*Arundina graminifolia*, 58, 60, 71  
*Ascocenda*, 311  
**ASCOMYCETES, 117, 126, 158, 159**  
**ASCOMYCETOUS FUNGI, 156, 157**  
**ASCOMYCOTINA, 117, 130, 153**  
*Ascorhizoctonia*, 168  
**ASPARAGOID LILIES, 87**  
*Asplenium*, 324, 336  
*Asplenium nidus*, 325, 342  
*Atractylodes macrocephala*, 262  
 Australian tree fern, 336  
 Avocado, 13  
 Bacteria, 170, 244, 247, 248  
 Bacteria, Gram-positive, 233  
*Barkeria elegans*, 320  
*Barkeria lindleyanum* (sic), 320  
*Barkeria skinneri*, 320  
**BASIDIOMYCETES, 117, 130, 132, 135, 142, 159, 169**

**BASIDIOMYCETES, sterile, 147**  
**BASIDIOMYCOTINA, 117, 134, 135**

*Beauveria bassiana*, 261, 262  
*Begonia*, 313  
 Bird's nest fern, 42  
*Bletia gebina*, 264  
*Bletia hyacinthina*, 214, 264  
*Bletia shepherdii*, 60  
*Bletilla*, 264, 277, 278, 280, 282  
*Bletilla gebinae*, 264  
*Bletilla striata*, 38, 39, 60, 68, 144, 213, 214, 215, 218, 220, 231, 258, 264, 265, 277, 279, 281–283  
*Bombyx mori*, 261, 262  
*Brachypetalum paphiopedilums*, 344, 345  
*Brachypetalum* section,  
*Paphiopedilum*, 361  
*Brassia*, 79, 83  
*Brassia maculata*, 78, 80  
**BROMELIACEAE, 169**  
**BULBOPHYLLINAE, 84, 85**  
*Bulbophyllum*, 337, 339  
*Bulbophyllum macranthum*, 84  
*Buthus martensi*, 261, 262

*Cadetia potamophila*, 84  
 Calabash, 345  
*Caladenia*, 148  
*Calanthe*, 97, 104, 105, 322, 323, 325, 326, 332  
*Calanthe Sedenii* 'Cornelius Vanderbilt', 104  
*Callista*, 84  
*Calopogon*, 39, 71  
*Calopogon pulchellus*, 60  
*Calypso*, 142, 150, 162, 357  
*Calypso bulbosa*, 33, 36, 38, 40, 47, 50–52, 54, 56, 57, 64, 70, 142, 143, 163, 167  
*Campylocentrum*, 158  
*Cantharides*, 259  
*Capsella*, 71  
 Carrots, 9  
*Casuarina*, 349, 357  
**CATASETIINAE, 83**  
**CATASETINAE, 85, 86**  
*Catasetum*, 158, 159  
*Catasetum maculatum*, 153, 154  
*Catasetum pileatum*, 86  
*Cattleya*, 19, 33, 77, 79, 83, 92, 115, 172, 173, 174, 206, 324, 332, 334, 335, 338–341, 343, 344, 346, 347, 354, 357, 361, 362  
*Cattleya aurantiaca*, 231, 278  
*Cattleya schombocattleya* (sic), 77, 78, 80  
*Cattleya X Schomburgkia*, 77  
*Cattleyas*, Brazilian bifoliate, 344, 361  
*Cenchrus ciliaris*, 61, 70  
*Cephalanthera longibracteata*, 60, 71  
*Cephalosporium*, 156, 167  
**CERATOBASIDIACEAE, 169**

*Ceratobasidium*, 130, 135, 136, 168  
*Ceratobasidium angustisporum*, 136, 137  
*Ceratobasidium cereale*, 136, 169  
*Ceratobasidium cornigerum*, 137, 167, 168  
*Ceratobasidium globisporum*, 137  
*Ceratobasidium graminearum*, 168  
*Ceratobasidium obscurum*, 137–139  
*Ceratobasidium papillatum*, 137  
*Ceratobasidium setariae*, 168  
*Ceratorhiza*, 128, 129, 130–132, 135, 138, 139, 168  
*Ceratorhiza goodyera-repentis*, 138, 139  
*Ceratorhiza pernacatena*, 138–141, 170  
*Ceratorhiza* sp., 133, 138, 139  
 Chicken, 78, 264  
 Chih Chien, 271  
 Children, 262  
 Chin chai Shih-hu, 266  
 Chin shih-hu, 280  
*Chloridium paucisporum*, 164, 170  
*Chrysanthemum morifolium*, 262  
 Chysis, 332  
*Cibotium*, 336  
 Citrus, 13  
*Clowesia dodsoniana*, 86, 86  
*Clowesia rosea*, 86  
 Coconut, 345  
 Coconut (fiber), 338  
 Coconut (husks), 340, 352  
*Coeloglossum*, 142, 161, 167  
*Coeloglossum viride*, 138, 139, 142, 143  
*Coelogyne*, 332  
*Colletotrichum*, 153, 154, 155, 158  
*Colletotrichum crassipes*, 158  
*Colletotrichum gloeosporioides*, 158  
*Colocasia esculenta*, xv  
*Columnocystis*, 168  
**COMPOSITAE, 70**  
*Condonopsis pilosula*, 262  
 Conifer, 351  
**CONIFERS, 71, 162**  
*Corallorhiza*, 83, 113, 127  
*Corallorhiza maculata*, 85–87, 113  
*Corallorhiza mertensiana*, 85, 86  
*Corallorhiza striata*, 133  
*Corallorhiza trifida*, 146, 147, 170  
**CORALLORHIZINAE, 113**  
 Corsican pine, 346  
**CORTICACEAE, 168**  
*Corticium catonii*, 135, 146  
*Corticium solani*, 167  
*Corybas macranthus*, 126, 167  
*Cottonia*, 33  
*Cremastra appendiculata*, 68  
*Crescentia cujete*, 345  
*Cryptomeria*, 185, 194, 202  
*Cryptomeria japonica*, 208  
**CYANASTRACEAE, 87**  
*Cyathea arborea*, 336  
*Cynoches*, 332  
*Cynoches pentadactylon*, 86, 86

*Cylindrocarpon*, 154, 158, 159, 161  
*Cylindrocarpon magnusianum*, 153, 154  
*Cymbidium*, xxviii, 19, 20, 44, 76, 77, 79, 80, 81, 81, 82, 83, 96, 112, 114, 115, 171, 172, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 180, 181, 182, 184, 185, 192, 197, 206–211, 285–289, 292–294, 310–314, 323, 325–329, 332, 334, 340, 342, 347, 360–362  
*Cymbidium Alexanderi* 'Westobirt', 76  
*Cymbidium bicolor*, 58, 72  
*Cymbidium Ceres*, 77  
*Cymbidium ceres* (see p. 77), 78, 79  
*Cymbidium Dag*, 286  
*Cymbidium dayanum*, 294  
*Cymbidium devonianum*, 86  
*Cymbidium Eiko*, 181, 183  
*Cymbidium ensifolium*, 176, 184, 294  
*Cymbidium floribundum*, 77, 206, 288, 294  
*Cymbidium Gawain* 'Empress', 182  
*Cymbidium giganteum*, 86  
*Cymbidium goeringii*, 68, 294–296, 311, 314, 316  
*Cymbidium Golden Wheel*, 181–183  
*Cymbidium insigne*, 180, 184, 290  
*Cymbidium insigne*  
 'Atrosanguinea', 176  
*Cymbidium kanran*, 294–296, 314  
*Cymbidium Katydid* 'Yasuko Oji', 180  
*Cymbidium Kenny*, 286  
*Cymbidium Kenny* 'Wine Color', 181–183  
*Cymbidium lancifolium*, 86  
*Cymbidium Louis Stewart*  
 'Snowflake', 181–183  
*Cymbidium lowianum*, 76  
*Cymbidium Mary Pinchess*, 286  
*Cymbidium Mary Pinchess*  
 'Golden Crown', 289  
*Cymbidium Mary Pinchess* 'The King', 182, 192  
*Cymbidium Melody Fair* 'Marilyn Monroe', 180–182  
*Cymbidium Memoria Cyril Strauss*, 77–80  
*Cymbidium Mini Dream* 'Golden Color', 287  
*Cymbidium*, miniature, 183, 184  
*Cymbidium Mizuho Okada*  
 'Christmas Tree', 182  
*Cymbidium mosaic virus*, 112  
*Cymbidium Napoleon*, 290  
*Cymbidium Nella*, 289  
*Cymbidium niveo-marginatum*, 294  
*Cymbidium O'Halloran Hill* 'War Point', 288  
*Cymbidium pumilum*, 77, 78, 80, 83, 176, 177, 182–184, 192, 290, 294

- Cymbidium pumilum* 'Gareth Lantagor', 77  
*Cymbidium pumilum* 'Gareth Latangor', 80  
*Cymbidium Reporsa*, 293  
*Cymbidium Roseville* 'Young Lady', 184  
*Cymbidium Ruby Eyes* 'Claret Vale', 288  
*Cymbidium Sazanami*, 152, 153, 177, 178  
*Cymbidium Sazanami* 'Harunoumi', 178, 179, 182–184, 286, 287, 291–293, **292**  
*Cymbidium Sazanami* 'Otome', 177  
*Cymbidium Show Girl* 'Husky Honey', 180, 181, 294  
*Cymbidium sinense*, 40, 50, 51, 54, 72, 73, 294  
*Cymbidium sinense forma kakuran*, 294  
*Cymbidium*, standard type, 173, 173, 180  
*Cymbidium striatum*, 214  
*Cymbidium Swallow*, 14  
*Cymbidium Sweetheart* 'Aso', 177  
*Cymbidium Walu* 'Angel', 182  
*Cymbidium Yasuko Oji*, 293  
*Cymbidiums*, see *Cymbidium*  
*Cypripedium guttatum*, 71  
**CYPRIPEDIOIDEAE**, 83, 85, 87, 111  
*Cypripedium*, 49, 56, 57, 64, 69, 71, 85, 112, 156, 162, 322, 323, 327–330, 361, 362  
*Cypripedium acaule*, 88, 330  
*Cypripedium arietinum*, 88  
*Cypripedium calceolus*, 88, 112  
*Cypripedium calceolus* var. *parviflorum*, 88  
*Cypripedium candidum*, 88  
*Cypripedium cordigerum*, 72  
*Cypripedium debile*, 70  
*Cypripedium insigne*, 58, 58  
*Cypripedium parviflorum*, 69  
*Cypripedium parviflorum* var. *planipetalum*, 88  
*Cypripedium parviflorum* var. *pubescens*, 88  
*Cypripedium passerinum*, 33, 37, 38, 40, 48, 49, 51, 56, 57, 70  
*Cypripedium reginae*, 88  
*Cypripedium spectabile*, 72  
**CYRTOPODIINAE**, 83, 85, 86  
*Cyrtopodium*, 85, 85, **86**  
*Cyrtopodium punctatum*, **86**  
  
*Dactylorhiza*, 70  
*Dactylorhiza*, xxix, 70, 88  
*Dactylorhiza aristata*, 60  
*Dactylorhiza maculata*, 52, 59, 70  
*Dactylorhiza purpurella*, 77  
*Dactylorhiza sambucina*, 60  
*Davilla mariesii*, 260  
*Davilla orientalis*, 260  
**DENDROBIEAE**, 84, **84**, 85  
  
**DENDROBIINAE**, 83–85, **84**, 115  
*Dendrobium*, 33, 39, 40, 42, 46, 70, 71, 78, **84**, **84**, 91, 92, 96, 97, 99, 100, **101**, 102, **103**, 104, 107, 112–114, 174, 186, 188, 194, 206, 208, 210, 211, 265, 270, 277, 278, 281, 282, 296, 297, 311, 316, 324, 325, 327, 331, 332, 335, 339, 345, 351, 352, 354, 361  
*Dendrobium aduncum*, **217**, **218**, **226**, 260, 266, 267  
*Dendrobium aggregatum*, **219**, 226, 267, 268  
*Dendrobium bellatulum*, **219**, **226**, 268  
*Dendrobium bilobulatum*, **84**  
*Dendrobium blumei*, **84**  
*Dendrobium candidum*, **220**, 266  
*Dendrobium Cassiope*, 187  
*Dendrobium ceraia*, 269  
*Dendrobium crispulum*, 266, 269  
*Dendrobium Christmas Chime*, 188, 193  
*Dendrobium chrysanthum*, **217**, **222**, **226**, **253**, 267  
*Dendrobium chryseum*, **222**  
*Dendrobium crepidatum*, 216, 227, 252, 268  
*Dendrobium crispulum*, **224**, **225**, **227**, 266, 269  
*Dendrobium christyanum*, **84**  
*Dendrobium crystallinum*, **84**  
*Dendrobium denneanum*, **222**, 267  
*Dendrobium devonianum*, 216, 268  
*Dendrobium*, earring, 266  
*Dendrobium ellipsophyllum*, **84**  
*Dendrobium farmeri*, 319  
*Dendrobium fimbriatum*, 217, **227**, 267, 268  
*Dendrobium fimbriatum* var. *oculatum*, 279  
*Dendrobium flabellum*, **220**  
*Dendrobium flaviflorum*, **223**, 269  
*Dendrobium formidible* type, **173**  
*Dendrobium Fortune*, 187  
*Dendrobium Golden Blossom*, 187, 188, 296  
*Dendrobium Golden Blossom* 'Kogane', 188  
*Dendrobium Golden Crescent*, 187, 188  
*Dendrobium*, Golden Hairpin, 266  
*Dendrobium*, gourd-bearing, 269  
*Dendrobium hancockii*, **226**, 260, 266, 267  
*Dendrobium hercoglossum*, **215**, **221**, 260, 266  
*Dendrobium Hinode*, 187, 188  
*Dendrobium Hinode* 'Toutenkou', 188, 189, 191, 192  
*Dendrobium huoshanense*, 268  
*Dendrobium Jaquelyn Thomas*, 94, 99  
*Dendrobium Jaquelyn Thomas* 'Uniwai Blush', 102  
  
*Dendrobium Jaquelyn Thomas* 'Uniwai Mist', 102  
*Dendrobium jenkinsii*, **219**  
*Dendrobium kwantungense*, 269  
*Dendrobium kwantungensis*, see *Dendrobium kwantungense*  
*Dendrobium linawianum*, **220**, 253, 260, 266  
*Dendrobium lindleyi*, 219, 268  
*Dendrobium loddigesii*, 216, 266, 268  
*Dendrobium lohohense*, 253, 266, 268, 277  
*Dendrobium lonchophyllum*, **224**, **225**  
*Dendrobium macrophyllum*, **84**  
*Dendrobium Malones*, 187, 188  
*Dendrobium Malones* 'Fantasy', 187, 188, 191, 192, 194  
*Dendrobium Malones* 'Hope', 297  
*Dendrobium*, miniature, **173**  
*Dendrobium Miyuki*, 188  
*Dendrobium moniliforme*, 187, 190, 192, 210, **217**, **222**, 260, 266, 269  
*Dendrobium moschatum*, **84**  
*Dendrobium nobile*, 186, 213, **215**, **221**, 254, 260, 266, 269, 270, 277, 279, 281, 282  
*Dendrobium nobile* Konan, 296  
*Dendrobium nobile* type, 171–174, 186, 192, 193, 195, 197, 211, 285, 296  
*Dendrobium Nodoka*, 190–192, 206  
*Dendrobium officinale*, **224**, **225**, 260, 266, 269  
*Dendrobium pallidiflorum*, **224**, **225**  
*Dendrobium phalaenopsis*, 172, **173**  
*Dendrobium phalaenopsis* type, 174  
*Dendrobium plicatile*, 267  
*Dendrobium pulchellum*, **218**, 269  
*Dendrobium salaccense*, **84**  
*Dendrobium Snowflake*, 187  
*Dendrobium Snowflake* 'Red Star', 187–194, 193, 194, 210, 297  
*Dendrobium taurinum*, **84**  
*Dendrobium thyrsoiflorum*, **84**  
*Dendrobium tosaense*, **216**, **222**, **224**, **225**, 268  
*Dendrobium Utopia*, 188  
*Dendrobium victoriae-reginae*, **64**  
*Dendrobium wangii*, 266, 269  
*Dendrobium White Angel*, 100, 102  
*Dendrobium wilsonii*, 260, 268  
*Dendrobium*, Yellow Herb, 267  
*Dendrobium Yellow Ribbon*, 193  
*Dendrobium Yukidaruma*, 187, 188  
*Dendrobium Yukidaruma* 'King', 188  
  
*Dendrobiums*, see *Dendrobium*  
*Dendroctonus penderosae*, 69  
*Diacrium*, 332  
*Dichaea*, 158, 162  
*Dichaea standleyi*, **160**, **161**  
*Dicksonia sellowiana*, 338

- Didymoplexis*, 145  
*Dimerandra*, 159  
*Dioscorea opposita*, 259  
*Diplocaulobium arachnoideum*, 84  
*Disa*, 83, 114, 355  
*Disa tripetaloides*, 114  
*Disa tripetaloides* ssp. *aurata*, 85  
*Disa tripetaloides* ssp. *tripetaloides*, 85  
*Doritaenopsis*, 306–308, 310, 313, 315  
*Doritaenopsis* Happy Valentine 'You', 308  
*Doritis*, 91  
*Doritis pulcherrima*, 72, 92, 105, 113  
**DOTHIDEALES**, 158  
*Dressleria helleri*, 86  
*Drynaria baronii*, 260  
*Drynaria fortunei*, 260  
*Drynaria propinqua*, 260  
  
*Earring Dendrobium*, 266  
*Elaeis guineensis*, 340  
*Encyclia*, 158, 159, 162  
*Encyclia tampensis*, 64, 69  
*Ephemerantha fimbriata*, 268, 269  
*Epicoccum*, 154, 158  
*Epicoccum andropogonis*, 156, 157, 159  
**EPIDENDREAE**, 60  
**EPIDENDROIDEAE**, 87  
*Epidendrum*, 33, 49, 72, 159, 161, 161, 164, 331, 332, 339  
*Epidendrum ibaguense*, 33, 35, 38, 40, 41, 45, 49, 51, 55, 57, 58, 62, 64, 66, 72  
*Epidendrum schlechterianum*, 156, 157  
*Epidendrum scutella*, 33, 52, 53, 62, 63, 64, 69  
*Epidendrum stangeanum*, 154, 155, 160, 161  
*Epidendrum tuberosum*, 214  
*Epidendrum variegatum*, 60  
*Epigeneium*, 84, 282  
*Epigeneium acuminatum*, 84  
*Epipactis*, 39, 40, 42, 44, 69, 70, 71, 72, 88  
*Epipactis helleborine*, 38, 58, 60, 96, 115, 169  
*Epipactis latifolia*, 49–52, 60  
*Epipactis microphylla*, 115  
*Epipactis palustris*, 43, 115  
*Epipactis papillosa*, 33  
*Epipactis papillosa* var. *papillosa*, 60  
*Epipactis papillosa* var. *syekiana*, 60  
*Epipactis pubescens*, 57, 60  
*Epipactis veratrifolia*, 58  
*Epipactis species*, 34  
*Epipogium aphyllum*, 33, 64, 69  
*Epipogium roseum*, 57, 64, 69  
*Epulorhiza*, 127, 130–132, 133, 140, 141, 151, 164, 168  
  
*Epulorhiza albertaensis*, 140, 141  
*Epulorhiza antitula*, 131  
*Epulorhiza pulorhiza*, 140, 141, 142  
*Epulorhiza calendulina*, 142, 170  
*Epulorhiza repens*, 128, 128, 129, 135, 140, 141, 142, 148  
*Eria javanica*, 84  
*Eria ovata*, 84  
**ERICACEAE**, xv, 156  
**ERICADS**, 162  
**ERIINAE**, 84  
*Eriobotrya japonica*, 259  
*Erythromyces*, 134, 135, 144  
*Erythromyces crocicreas*, 144  
*Eulophia dabia*, 60  
*Eulophia petersii*, 86  
**EUPHORBIACEAE**, 16  
*Euphoria longana*, 342  
*Evodia rutaecarpa*, 259  
  
*Favolaschia dybowskiana*, 144  
*Favolaschia*, 134, 144  
*Favolaschia dybowskiana*, 168  
*Favolaschia thwaitesia*, 144  
*Favolaschia thwaitesia* var. *dybowskiana*, 144  
*Fern*, 325, 330  
*Fern*, bird's nest, 342  
*Fir* (bark), 340  
*Flickingeria*, 265, 282  
*Flickingeria fimbriata*, 218, 224, 225, 226, 267, 268  
*Flickingeria fugax*, 84  
*Flickingeria lonchophylla*, 268  
*Flickingeria*, melon, 268  
*Flickingeria xantholeuca*, 224, 225  
*Fomes*, 146  
*Fomes nastoporus*, 271  
*Fomes* sp., 135  
*Formosae*, 84  
*Frangipanni*, 345  
*Fritillaria thunbergii*, 59  
*Fritillaria verticillata* var. *thunbergii*, 259  
*Fritillaria cirrhosa*, 260  
*Fungi*, 233, 244, 247  
**FUNGI IMPERFECTI**, 117, 130, 132, 153  
**FUNGI, SAPROPHYTIC**, 135  
*Fusarium*, 154, 158, 159, 161  
*Fusarium oxysporum*, 159  
*Fusarium solani*, 156, 157, 159  
  
*Galeandra*, 86  
*Galeandra devoniana*, 86  
*Galeola altissima*, 144, 168  
*Galeola septentrionalis*, 136, 167, 168, 169  
*Gasteria verrucosa*, 69, 72  
*Gastrodia*, 151, 271, 277, 278  
*Gastrodia*, Chinese, 280  
*Gastrodia cunninghamii*, 167, 271, 280  
  
*Gastrodia elata*, 33, 64, 65, 69, 168, 213, 219, 228–230, 255, 260, 271–273, 277, 280, 281, 283  
*Gastrodia mairei*, 271  
*Gastrodia minor*, 280  
*Gastrodia sesamoides*, 167, 271, 280  
*Gaultheria shallon*, 156, 160, 161, 170  
*Geotrichopsis*, 134, 142, 143, 145, 153  
*Geotrichopsis mycoparasitica*, 170  
*Geotrichopsis parasitica*, 145  
*Geotrichopsis* sp., 131, 141–143  
*Glehnia littoralis*, 260  
*Gliocladium*, 161, 164  
*Gloriosa*, 208  
*Glossodia*, 148  
*Golden Hairpin Dendrobium*, 266  
*Gongora*, 159, 162  
*Goodyera oblongifolia*, 128, 129, 133, 138, 139, 142, 143  
*Goodyera repens*, 166, 167, 169  
*Gourd-bearing Dendrobium*, 269  
*Gammangis ellisii*, 86  
*Grammatophyllum speciosum*, 86  
*Grapes*, 5  
*Grapevines*, 5  
*Grastidium*, 84  
*Grobysa galeata*, 86  
*Gymnadenia*, 88  
*Gymnadenia conopsea*, 31, 72  
*Gymnadenia odoratissima*, 133  
*Gyrostachys*, 60, 71  
*Gyrostachys cernua*, 60  
*Gyrostachys gracilis*, 60  
*Habenaria*, 69, 72  
*Habenaria clavigera*, 60  
*Habenaria latilabris*, 60  
*Haliotidis diversicolor*, 262  
*Haliotidis gigantea* discuss, 262  
*Hawaiian tree fern*, 336  
*Helicobasidium brebissonii*, 131  
*Heliotropium*, 208  
*Herba Dendrobii minima*, 269  
*Herba Dendrobii recens*, 267  
*Herba Dendrobii rotundicaulis*, 266  
*Herminium angustifolium*, 59, 70  
*Herminium gramineum*, 58, 60  
*Herminium monorchis*, 59, 69  
*Herminium pugioniforme*, 58  
*Hetaeria shikokiana*, 33, 72  
*Hexisea*, 158  
*Horses*, 9  
*Huan Shih*, 266  
*Huan tsao Shih-hu*, 267  
*Hymenochaete crocicreas*, 144, 167, 168  
**HYMENOMYCETES**, 167  
**HYMENOPTERA**, xx  
**HYPHOMYCETES**, 166, 169  
**HYPHOMYCETES**, 170  
**HYPOXIDACEAE**, 87  
*Hypoxylon*, 153, 159  
*Hypoxylon* cf. *unitum*, 156, 157, 159

*Hypoxylon cf. unitum*, 159

## IRIDACEAE, 87

Irises, rhizomatous, 4

*Jacquinella*, 158

Japanese cedar, 208

*Jimensia*, 264

*Juniperus communis*, 169

*Laelia*, 324, 332

LAELIINAE, 112

*Lasiodiplodia*, 153, 159

*Lasiodiplodia theobromae*, **156**,  
157, 159

*Latouria*, **84**

LEGUMINALES, 65, 71

*Leptodontidium*, 135, 156, 161

*Leptodontidium orchidicola*, **156**,  
157, 161, 164, 167

*Leptodontidium orchidicola*, 161

*Leptospermum scoparium*, 271

Lettuce, 9

Lilacs, 4

LILIACEAE, 87

*Lilium candidum*, 49

*Lilium regale*, 49

*Limodora striata*, 214

*Limodorum striatum*, 214

*Liparis bituberculata*, **84**

*Listera microglottis*, 60

*Listera ovata*, 96, 115

Longan, 342

*Lycaste*, 332, 340, 356, 361

*Lycium chinense*, 260

*Ma pien Shih-hu*, 267

Maize, 112

MALAXIDEAE, **84**, 85

Malaxis, 72

*Malaxis saprophyta*, 59, 60, 72

*Malbranchea*, 144, 169

*Marasmius coniatus*, 145

*Marasmius*, 134, 135, 144

*Marasmius coniatus*, 146

Marine animals, 17

*Masdevallia*, 337, 362

*Maxillaria*, 158, 161, 162

*Maxillaria endresii*, 163

*Melaleuca*, 357

*Melaleuca uncinata*, 148

*Melanotus*, 127, 134, 135, 145, 168

*Melanotus alpiniae*, **142**, **143**, 145,  
146

*Melon Flickingeria*, 268

Mice, 261

*Microcoelia hirschbergii*, 144

*Microstylis muscifera*, 60, 72

*Microstylis musifera*, 59

*Microtis*, 148

*Miltonia*, **173**, 174, 175, 332, 341,  
347

*Moniliopsis*, 130–132, **133**, 135,  
**142**, **143**, 146, 148, 168

*Moniliopsis aderholdii*, 146

*Moniliopsis cf. solani*, **131**

*Moniliopsis solani*, 147, 150

*Monochaetia*, 169

MONOCOTS, LILIOID, 112

MONOCOTS, petaloid, 87

*Moniliopsis anomala*, 146

*Mormodes wolteriana*, 86, **86**

*Mycelium radialis atrovirens*, 162,  
167

*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, 258

Mycorrhizal fungi from orchids  
(Table 4-1), 118–125

Mycorrhizas from orchids (Table  
4-1), 118–125

*Mylabris cichorii*, 259

*Mylabris phalerata*, 259

*Myoxanthus*, 158

*Myrothecium*, 161

*Nectria*, 158, 159, 161, 169

*Nectria alata*, 162

*Nectria haematococca*, **156**, **157**,  
159, 161

*Neofinetia*, 97, 306

*Neottia listeroides*, 60

NEOTTIEAE, 60

NEOTTIOIDEAE, 87

*Nidema*, 159, 164

*Nidema boothii*, **163**

*No Ran* (*Bletilla striata*), 214

Nobile type *Dendrobium*, see

*Dendrobium, nobile*

*Nodulisporium*, 154, 159, **160**, **161**,  
161

*Octomeria*, 146, 162

*Odontoglossum*, 331, 332, 339, 346,  
347, 361

*Odontoglossum hastilabium*, 319

*Odontoglossum ringspot*, 112

*Oidiodendron*, xv, 127, 153, 154,

162, 167

*Oidiodendron cereale*, **160**, **161**

*Oidiodendron echinulatum*, **160**, **161**

*Oidiodendron flavum*, **160**, **161**

*Oidiodendron maius*, **160**, **161**

Oil palm, 340

ONCIDIINAE, 83, 84, **86**, 112

*Oncidium*, 84, 158, 172, **173**, 174,  
332, 339, 356

*Oncidium excavatum*, 84, 85, 86

*Oncidium praetextum*, 38, 60

*Oncidium Sazanami* 'Champion',  
177

OOMYCOTA, 126

*Ophrydées*, 280

*Ophrys*, xx

*Ophrys insectifera*, xx

Orchid mycorrhizal fungi (Table  
4-1), 118–125

ORCHIDACEAE, xv, xxvii, xxx,  
32, **34**, 58, 68–72, 82, 87, 106,  
111–113, 115, 117, 169, 170, 282

tropical, xix

ORCHIDEAE, 60

ORCHIDOIDEAE, 87

Orchids and their mycorrhiza  
(Table 4-1), 118–125

Orchids, epiphytic, 33, 34, 317,  
343, 345, 354, 358

subtropical, 50

temperate, 33

terrestrial, 33, 34, 353

tropical, 33, 34

*Orchis*, 31, 39, 40, 42, 52, 71, 88,  
114, 150

*Orchis aristata*, 60

*Orchis longicornu*, 88, **89**

*Orchis maculata*, 52, 70, 71

*Orchis morio*, 31, 88, **89**, 114

*Orchis morio* ssp. *picta*, 88

*Orchis purpurella*, 77, 167

*Orchis sambucina*, 60

*Oreorchis*, 59

*Oreorchis patens*, 59, 60, 68

*Osmunda*, 323, 325, 339

*Osmunda regalis*, 324, 338, 339

*Panax pseudoginseng*, 259

*Panus gloeophylloides*, 151

*Paphiopedilum*, 33, 39, 52, 65, 69,  
85, 87, **173**, 311, 325, 326,

328–330, 334, 341, 344, 345, 347,

348, 351, 352, 356, 360, 361

*Paphiopedilum concolor*, 34

*Paphiopedilum godefroyae*, 64, 71

*Paphiopedilum insignis*, 57, 334

*Paphiopedilum malipoense*, **84**

*Paphiopedilum spicerianum*, 40, 42,  
52, 69

*Pedilonum*, 84

*Penicillifer*, 154, 161, 162, 169

*Penicillifer bipapillatus*, **160**, **161**,  
162

*Penicillium*, 154, 161

*Penicillium balaji*, 168

*Peristeria*, 332

*Pestalotia*, 169

*Pestalotiopsis*, 153, 162

*Pestalotiopsis versicolor*, 162, **163**

*Phaius*, 325, 326, 332, 355

*Phaius grandifolius*, 330, 362

*Phaius tankervilleae*, 52, 54, 62, 72,  
330

*Phalaenopsis*, 32, 33, 69, 70, 79, 83,  
88, 93, 94, **95**, 96, 97, 101, 103,

106, 107, 111, 112, 113, 114, 172,

**172**, **173**, 175, 192, 196, 197, 199,

200, 202, 203, 203, 206, 207, 208,

210, 211, 212, 280, 285, 297–299,

**300**, 302, 304–307, 309–316, 323,

328, 332, 335, 339–342, 346–348,

354, 356, 358, 361, 362

*Phalaenopsis amabilis*, 78, 80, 89,

192, 199, 200, 298, 301

*Phalaenopsis amabilis* var.

*grandiflora*, 89, 90

*Phalaenopsis amabilis* var. *formosa*,

89, 90

*Phalaenopsis amabilis* X

*Phalaenopsis stuartiana*, 298

*Phalaenopsis amboinensis*, 298

- Phalaenopsis* (Bruce Shaffer X Patricia Neal), 192, 201  
*Phalaenopsis* Crystal Veil PM68, 107, 308  
*Phalaenopsis equestris*, 105  
*Phalaenopsis fasciata*, 298  
*Phalaenopsis gigantea*, 298  
*Phalaenopsis* (Hatsuyuki X Musashino), 192  
*Phalaenopsis hieroglyphica*, 298  
*Phalaenopsis intermedia*, 298, 301  
*Phalaenopsis* (Jimmy Hall 'Jouch Petals' X Jimmy Hall), 192  
*Phalaenopsis* (Jimmy Hall 'Jouch Petals' X Jimmy Hall), 192, 201  
*Phalaenopsis leucorrhoda*, 298  
*Phalaenopsis lueddemanniana*, 301  
*Phalaenopsis* (Malibu Victory X Arai) X (Joseph Hampton X Naughty Pink 'Extra'), 196  
*Phalaenopsis* (Miki Saito X Patricia Neal), 201  
*Phalaenopsis* Mount Kaala, 192  
*Phalaenopsis* (Musasino X Grace Palm), 197  
*Phalaenopsis pulchra*, 298  
*Phalaenopsis* (Radiance X Aglow) X *Phalaenopsis equestris*, 308  
*Phalaenopsis schilleriana*, 298  
*Phalaenopsis stuartiana*, 298, 301  
*Phalaenopsis* [(Surfrider X Yukimai) X Yukimai], 196  
*Phalaenopsis* (Takizo X Yukimai), 199  
*Phalaenopsis* [Wataboushi X (Grand City X Texas Thunder)], 199  
*Phalaenopsis* Wedding Promenade PM70, 308  
*Phalaenopsis* Wedding Promenade PM78, 308  
*Phalaenopsis* Wedding Promenade PM79, 308  
PHANEROGAMS, 70  
*Phialocephala*, 135, 153, 162  
*Phialocephala fortinii*, 128, 129, 161, 163, 164, 167, 170, 278  
*Phialophora finlandia*, 164, 170  
*Phragmipedium*, 85, 87  
*Phragmipedium lindenii*, 319  
*Phymatodes lucida*, 260  
*Picea abies*, 168  
Pine, 349  
Pine, corsican, 346  
*Pinellia ternata*, 259  
*Pinus*, 146, 349, 351  
*Pinus contorta*, 179  
*Pinus ponderosa*, 331  
*Pinus sylvestris*, 168, 342  
*Piperia*, 148  
*Platanthera*, 59, 69, 142, 148, 156, 161, 167  
*Platanthera bifolia*, 59, 70  
*Platanthera dilatata*, 140, 141  
*Platanthera hyperborea*, 128, 129, 138, 139, 156, 157  
*Platanthera obtusata*, 133, 140, 141, 147  
*Platanthera praeclara*, 138, 139  
*Platanthera sachalinensis*, 38  
*Platanthera tipuloides* var. *nipponica*, 38  
*Platycodon grandiflorum*, 260  
*Pleione*, 349, 360  
*Pleospora*, 158  
*Pleurothallis*, 131, 142, 143, 144, 159, 161, 163, 337  
*Pleurothallis phyllocardioides*, 156, 157  
*Plumeria obtusifolia*, 345  
*Plumeria rubra*, 345  
PODOCHILEAE, 84  
*Pogonia japonica*, 34, 38, 58, 68  
*Polygala tenuifolia*, 262  
*Polygonium*, 31  
*Polygonum*, 54, 56  
*Polypodium*, 324–326, 330, 336–339, 343, 352  
*Polypodium vulgare*, 339  
Polyporaceae, 151  
*Polystachya*, 144, 153, 154  
*Prasophyllum*, 153  
*Pseuderia*, 85  
*Pseuderia smithiana*, 84  
*Pseudodryaria coronans*, 260  
Rabbits, 261  
*Racemosae*, 114  
Radishes, 9  
Redwood, American, 351  
*Rehmannia glutinosa*, 259  
*Rehmannia glutinosa* f. *huechingiensis*, 259  
*Rhizanthella*, 150, 170  
*Rhizobium*, 84  
*Rhizoctonia*, 77, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 166–170  
*Rhizoctonia cerealis*, 168  
*Rhizoctonia crocorum*, 130  
*Rhizoctonia solani*, 166, 168–170  
*Rhopalanthe*, 84  
Rodriguezia, 158, 159  
*Rodriguezia compacta*, 128, 129, 142, 143, 156, 157  
*Rudia cordifolia*, 259  
*Rudia cordifolia* var. *longifolia*, 259  
*Rudia truppeliana*, 259  
SAPROPHYTIC FUNGI, 154  
*Satyrium nepalense*, 58  
*Scaphyglottis*, 158, 161  
*Schombocattleya*, 77  
*Schomburgkia*, 77  
*Schomburgkia undulata*, 319  
Scorpion, 261, 262  
*Sebacina*, 130, 134, 148  
*Sebacina vermifera*, 148, 170  
*Sepia esculenta*, 260  
*Sepia maindroni*, 260  
*Sequoia sempervirens*, 351  
*Serapias pseudocardigera*, 69  
She-oak, 357  
Shih-hu, 265, 266, 267, 268  
Silkworm, 9, 262  
*Sistotrema*, 128, 132, 133, 134, 135, 148  
*Sistotrema brinkmannii*, 148  
*Sistotrema* sp., 128, 129, 147  
*Sobralia*, 158, 161  
*Sophranitella violacea*, 357  
*Sophronitis*, 332  
*Spathoglottis plicata*, 77  
*Spatulata*, 84  
*Sphagnum*, 339  
*Sphagnum squarrosum*, 339  
*Spiranthes*, 60, 148, 156, 161  
*Spiranthes australis*, 60, 69, 70  
*Spiranthes cernua*, 65, 72  
*Spiranthes lacera*, 140, 141  
*Spiranthes sinensis*, 38, 71, 170  
*Spiranthes sinensis* var. *amoena*, 169, 170  
Sporangial fungi, 126  
*Stanhopea*, 332  
*Staphylococcus aureus*, 231, 235, 236, 251  
*Stelis*, 158, 159, 161, 162  
*Stemona japonica*, 259  
*Stemona sessilifolia*, 259  
*Stemona tuberosa*, 259  
*Stilbella*, 161  
*Streptococcus mutans*, 231, 235, 236, 251  
Table 4-1: Orchid mycorrhiza fungi, 118–125  
Taro, xv, 21, 22  
*Tectona grandis*, 345  
*Tetracladium*, 154, 164  
*Tetracladium maxilliforme*, 163, 164  
*Thanatephorus*, 130, 134, 146, 148, 153  
*Thanatephorus cuscumeri*, 147, 148, 149, 150, 168  
*Thanatephorus gardneri*, 149, 150  
*Thanatephorus orchidicola*, 149, 150  
*Thanatephorus pennatus*, 127, 142, 143, 149, 150, 167  
*Thanatephorus sterigmaticus*, 149, 150  
*Thecostele secunda*, 86  
THECOSTELINAE, 86  
*Thelymitra*, 150  
T'ien Ma, 271  
Tomato, 9, 114  
Tree fern, 345  
Tree fern, Australian, 336  
Tree fern, Hawaiian, 336  
*Trichocentrum*, 84  
*Trichoderma*, 154, 164  
*Trichoderma* cf. *harzianum*, 163  
*Trichosalpinx*, 158, 159, 162  
*Trichosporiella*, 156, 164  
*Trichosporiella multisporum*, 163, 164  
*Trigonidium*, 156, 158, 159, 161

- Trigonidium riopalenquense*, **153**,  
**154**, **163**  
*Tulasnella*, 130, 134, 151  
*Tulasnella allantospora*, 151, 423  
*Tulasnella asymmetrica*, 151, **152**  
*Tulasnella calospora*, 77, 142, 151,  
**152**  
*Tulasnella cruciata*, 151, **152**  
*Tulasnella irregularis*, **152**  
*Tulasnella violacea*, 151, **152**  
  
*Ulmus glabra*, 61  
*Uncaria rhynchophylla*, 262, 281  
*Uncaria sinensis*, 262  
*Uropedium lindenii*, 319  
  
*Vanda*, 69, 76, 77, 90, 111, 174,  
312, 314, 315, 323, 327, 331, 332,  
335, 339–341, 347, 348, 354, 357,  
361, 362  
  
*Vanda* Miss Joaquim, 19  
*Vanda sanderiana*, 76, 82  
*Vanda-Arachnis* tribe, 352  
Vandas, see *Vanda*  
VANDEAE, 84  
*Vandopsis*, 325  
*Vanilla*, 20, 65, 73, 78, 148, 166,  
332  
*Vanilla planifolia*, 78  
VANILLOIDEAE, 87  
*Veluticeps*, 168  
*Verticillium*, 164  
  
*Waitea*, 130, 146  
White fir, 335  
  
*Xerotinus*, 151  
*Xerotus*, 151  
*Xerotus afer*, 151  
*Xerotus erubescens*, 151  
  
*Xerotus javanicus*, 146, 151  
*Xylaria*, 153, 159, **163**  
XYLARIALES, 159  
  
Yellow Herb *Dendrobium*, 267  
*Ypsilonidium*, 134, 153  
*Ypsilonidium anomalum*, **149**, 153  
*Yu kue Shih-hu*, 268  
  
*Zeuxine strateumatica*, 65, 72  
*Zeuxine sulcata*, 39, 72  
ZYGOMYCOTA, 126

# Index of Subjects

This index was prepared with Indexer 2.0, a program written in 1977 by Joshua Rehman, an undergraduate student at the University of California, Irvine. The program is actually a macro for Excel97. Copies are available free of charge from Professor J. Arditti. Requests must be accompanied by a 3.5 inch IBM-formatted disk and a self-addressed stamped mailer and no money, or US\$ 25.00 (please note the word "or"). Indexer I was written by Kevin J. Hackett, also an undergraduate student at UCI, in 1983–1984 and revised in 1989–1990 by two other undergraduates. It was used to prepare the indices for OB III–VI.

Glossary entries are not included in this index because all terms in the glossaries are already in alphabetical order. Page numbers for all glossaries are included in the index.

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- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1-Aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylic acid, see ACC                            | 2,4,7-Trimethoxyphenanthrene, 251   | bibenzyl, 247   |
| 1-(4-Hydroxybenzyl)-4-methoxy-9,10-dihydrophenanthrene-2,7-diol, 249      | 2,6-bis(p-Hydroxybenzyl)-3',5'-dihydroxy-3-hydroxy-bibenzyl, 233                          | 3,4'-Dihydroxy-5-methoxy-dihydro stilbene, 278                        |
| 1,6-bi(4-Hydroxybenzyl)-4-methoxy-9,10-dihydroxyphenanthrene-27-diol, 232 | 2,7-Dihydroxy-1-(4'-hydroxybenzyl)-4-methoxy-9,10-dihydrophenanthrene-4'-O-glucoside, 242 | 3,4-Dihydroxybenzaldehyde, 255  |
| 1,8-(bi-4-Hydroxybenzyl)-4-methoxy-phenanthrene-2,7-diol, 232             | 2,7-Dihydroxy-1-(p-hydroxybenzyl)-4-methoxy-9,10-dihydroxyphenanthrene, 243               | 3',5'-Dihydroxy-2-(p-hydroxybenzyl)-3-methoxy-bibenzyl, 246           |
| 1-p-Hydroxybenzyl-4-methoxy-phenanthrene-2,7-diol, 250                    | 2,7-Dihydroxy-1,3-(p-hydroxybenzyl)-4-methoxy-9,10-dihydrophenanthrene, 242               | 3,7-Dihydroxy-2,4-dimethoxy-phenanthrene-3-O-glucoside, 245           |
| 2,3,4,7-Tetramethoxyphenanthrene-3,3',5'-trimethoxybibenzyl, 251          | 2,7-Dihydroxy-4-methoxyphenanthrene-2,7-O-diglucoside, 244                                | 4-Ethoxymethyl phenyl 4'-hydrobenzyl ether, 255                       |
| 2,4-D   | 2,7-Dihydroxy-4-methoxyphenanthrene-2-O-glucoside, 243                                    | 4-Hydroxybendroxine, 255  |
| A + T content in DNA, effect on, 82                                       | 3-(4-Hydroxybenzyl)-4-methoxy-9,10-dihydrophenanthrene-2,7-diol, 249                      | 4-Methoxy-9-10-dihydrophenanthrene-2,7-diol, 250                      |
| chromocenter enlargment, 81, 82   | 3,3'-Dihydroxy-2-(p-hydroxybenzyl)-5-methoxy-bibenzyl, 245                                | 4,4'-Dihydroxydiphenylmethane, 255                                    |
| differentiation, and, 289   | 3,3'-Dihydroxy-4-(p-hydroxybenzyl)-5-methoxy-bibenzyl, 246                                | 4,4'-Hydroxydibenzyl ether, 256                                       |
| G + C content in DNA, effect on, 82                                       | 3,3'-Dihydroxy-5-methoxy-2,5',6'-tris(p)-hydroxybenzyl)                                   | 4,7-Dihydroxy-1-p-hydroxybenzyl-2-methoxy-9,10-hydrophenanthrene, 247 |
| oriental <i>Cymbidium</i> , effects on, 295                               |   | 4,7-Dihydroxy-2-methoxy-9,10-dihydrophenanthrene, 248                 |
| shoot formation, 286  |   | 6-Hydroxydendroxine, 255  |
| 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid, see 2,4-D                                 |   | 6-Hydroxy-nobilonine, 254   |
| 2,4,7-Trimethoxy-9,10-dihydrophenanthrene-3,5-dimethoxybibenzyl, 251      |   | ABA, 286  |
|   |   | organogenesis, effect on, 286   |
|   |   | Aborigines, Queensland, 20  |
|   |   | Abscisic acid, see ABA  |

- ACC, 93, 94, 184  
 accumulation after pollination, 93  
 ethylene biosynthesis from, 95  
 gene expression, 93  
 mRNA, 96  
 RNA probe, 93  
 precursor, the, 93  
 signal, as, 93  
 transcriptions, 93
- ACC synthase  
 ethylene biosynthesis, 96  
 ethylene regulation, 93  
 expression, 93  
 mRNA, 93, 96  
 transcripts, 93
- Acervulus, 154, 155  
*Phalaenopsis* leaf segments, effects on, 300, 301  
*Phalaenopsis* root tips, effects on, 302
- Aeration, 194
- Agricultural school, Mikve Israel, 9
- Alba coloration, 92
- Alkaloids, 252–255
- Alleles, 87, 89
- Alomae virus disease of taro, 22
- Aluminum, 255
- Ambon, Indonesia, 20
- America, 11
- American Air Force, 5  
 orchid scientist, 29
- American Journal of Botany*, 18
- Amino acids, 255, 290
- p-amino benzoic acid, 295
- Aminoethoxyvinylglycine, see AVG
- Ammonium, 291
- Ampicillin, 298
- Amyloplasts, see also starch, 44
- Anatomy attributes, 82
- Anatropous orientation, 40, 41
- Aneuploids, reduction, 90
- Aneuploidy, changes in  
 chromosome numbers, 90
- Annual Reviews of Plant Physiology*, xxiv, xxv, 1, 25, 28
- Anther, 224, 225
- Anther cap, 220, 221, 224, 225
- Anthesis, 33, 38, 92, 35, 36
- Anthocyanidin, 91
- Anthocyanins  
 genes, 91  
 levels, 184  
 light, effects on synthesis, 91  
 temperature, effects on, 18, 19, 91, 184, 185
- Anthraquinone, 231
- Anti-auxin, 296
- Anti-bacterial activity, 231, 233, 235, 236, 247, 248, 251
- Antibiotics, 100, 103  
 resistance, 100
- Anticonvulsant, 256
- Antiepileptic, 256
- Anti-fungal activity, 233, 247, 248
- Antihelminthic, 241
- Anti-inflammatory activity, 276
- Anti-microbial activity, 276, 277
- Anti-microbials, 298
- Anti-oxidant scavenging, 277
- Antipodals, 54, 58, 63, 55  
 degeneration, 59
- Antisemitism, World War II in  
 Bulgaria, 5–8
- Apical meristem, 221
- Apiculus, 142, 143, 161, 162
- Apple juice, 290
- Arab graveyard, 9
- Archeosporial cells, 38–40, 64, 35–37  
 differentiation, 94  
 epiphytic species, 34  
 phase, 183  
 terrestrial species, 34
- Archeosporium, 38
- Arctic marine ecology, 16, 17
- Arctic Research Laboratory Ice Station II (ARLIS II), 17
- Arditti family, 1–6, 8–10, 3
- Arginine, 290
- ARLIS II, see Arctic Research Laboratory Ice Station
- Arthroconidia, 142, 143
- Asci, 156, 157
- Ascospores, 156, 157
- Asia, 8
- Aspartate aminotransferase, 90
- Aspartic acid, 290, 295
- Associate Editors, 1
- Atipodals apparatus, 58
- Auramine O, 77
- Australia, 20
- Austria, 2
- Autobiographies, xxv
- Auxin  
 Discovery, 24  
 post-pollination effects, 33  
 required for ovule development, 34
- Auxins, see listings for individual compounds
- AVG, 296
- BA  
 bud sprouting, effects on, 187  
 explant growth, and, 287  
 flowering control, *Phalaenopsis*, 201  
 multiplication, and, 289  
 oriental *Cymbidium*, effects on, 295, 296  
*Phalaenopsis*, effects on  
 flower-stalk tips, 301  
 lateral buds, 303  
 leaf segments, 299–301  
 plantlets in vitro, 306  
 root tips, 302  
 root formation, effects on, 285  
 shoot formation, effects on, 286
- Backbulbs, starch in, 181
- Banana  
 homogenate, 290, 307  
 fried, 28
- Banda, Indonesia, 20
- Bandung, Indonesia, 20
- Bangkok, Thailand, xxiii, 20
- BAP, see BA
- Bark, 185, 202  
 granulation, 194  
 growth in, 194  
 Hydrogel addition to, 194  
 polyvinyl alcohol addition to, 194  
 water holding capacity of, 194
- Basidia, 137, 139, 140, 149, 152  
 morphology, 131  
 orchid mycorrhiza, associated with, 142, 143, 147  
 sterile, 147
- Basidiospores, 137, 142, 143, 149, 152
- Basidium, 142, 143
- Batatasin III, 231, 278
- Benedict Canyon, 12
- Benefactors, Rau family, 14, 15
- Benlate, 298
- Benzalkonium chloride, 302
- Benzylamino purine, 186, 187
- Betaine, 277
- Beverly Hills, California, 12, 13
- Bialaphos herbicide, 101, 102
- Biology, history of, 16, 17
- Bioluminescence, 101, 135
- Biotin, *Phalaenopsis* leaf segments, effects on, 300
- Birth control, orchids, use of, 20
- Bisporic, 33, 46, 49, 50, 52
- Bisporic pattern, 61, 65  
 callose, role of, 50  
 callose, walls in, 49  
 cell contents, 33, 52  
 diandrous orchids, 46  
 organelles, 52
- Blastoconidia, 156, 157
- Bleach, household, 126
- Blepirol, 234
- Blestrianol A, 236
- Blestrianol B, 237
- Blestrianol C, 237
- Blestriarine A, 235
- Blestriarine B, 235
- Blestriarine C, 236
- Blestrin A, 238
- Blestrin B, 238
- Blestrin C, 239
- Blestrin D, 239
- Bletitol A, 240
- Bletitol B, 240
- Bletitol C, 241  
 lowered, 254, 277
- Blooming, 4
- Blue Pacific, 29
- Bobone virus disease of taro, 22
- Bombardment, microparticle, 101
- Bombardment, particle, 98
- Bombings, World War II in

- Bulgaria, 9  
 Boris Godunov, opera in  
   Leningrad, 7  
 Borubudur temple, Indonesia, 20  
 Botanical gardens  
   Bogor, Indonesia, xxiii, 7, 19,  
   20, 24–26  
   Singapore, xxiii, 21, 23  
*Botanical Journal of the Linnean  
   Society of London*, 21  
   Bulgarian botanists, 7  
 Branching pattern, 35  
 Breeding orchids, 96–106  
   genome, 96  
   marker-assisted, 105  
   molecular, 97  
 British Air Force, 5  
 Bromine, 255  
 Brother, M. Arditti, 2–4, 8–11  
 Bruins, UCLA, 16  
 Bud, 221  
 Buds  
   basal, 175  
   blasting, 183, 184  
   2-aminoxyacetic acid effects,  
   184  
   aminoethoxy-vinylglycine  
   effects, 184  
   ethylene effects, 184  
   uniconazole effects, 184  
   growth, 186  
   lateral, 97, 175  
   sprouting  
     benzylamino purine effects,  
     186  
     cuttings, 186  
     mother plants, on, 187  
     temperature effects, on, 186  
 Buitenzorg, see Bogor Botanical  
   Gardens, 24  
 Bulgaria, 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 27, 28  
 Bulgarian King Boris, 6  
  
 Calcium, 255, 290, 291  
   hypochlorite, 126  
   phosphate, 300  
 California, 2  
   southern, 6  
 Callose  
   Callose deposition, 49, 50  
   embryo sac development, and,  
   49  
   distribution, 49–51  
   function, 50  
   pollen development, and, 50  
   presence in *Cymbidium sinense*,  
   51  
   walls, in, 49, 36, 37, 40, 41, 47,  
   48  
 Callosic wall, 40, 41, 45  
 CAM, see Crassulacean acid  
   metabolism  
 Cameras, Nikon, 2  
 Cannibal, former, 7  
 Carbon fixation, (see also CAM  
   and photosynthesis) 19  
  
 Cardiac activity, reduction, 254,  
   277  
 Carotenoids, 91  
 cDNA, 91, 93, 94  
   flower, 96  
   gynoecium, 96  
   ovary, 96  
   perianth, 96  
 Cells  
   aggregates, 101  
   archesporial, 34, 38, 39, 35–37  
   binucleate, 46  
   central, 63  
   central cylinder, 221  
   chalazal, 46  
   cortical, 77  
   differentiation, 42  
   dimensions, 51  
   diploid, 76  
   division, meiotic, 49  
   DNA content, 76  
   dyad, 40, 41  
   elongation, 40, 41  
   endopolyploid, 77  
   epidermal, 38, 39, 64  
   expansion,  
     rapid, 49  
     unusual, 40, 41  
   intact, 103  
   integumentary, 59  
   isodiametric, 40  
   moniloid, 132  
   multinucleate, 132  
   nucellar, 38, 39, 52  
   plant, 92  
   plate, 49  
   PLB, 77  
   poles, 42  
   protocorms, 77  
   scalariform, 222  
   size, 49  
   somatic, 51  
   subepidermal, 39, 35  
   subterminal, 38  
   terminal, 38  
   transfusion, 222  
   tertraploid, 76  
   transfusion, 222  
   walls, 40, 42, 57, 63, 43  
     invaginations, 42  
 Cereal agar (CER), 129  
 Chalaza  
   callose, role of, 40, 42, 50, 35–37,  
   40, 41, 43  
   end, 58, 62, 63  
   nuclei, 54, 56–58, 62, 56  
   poles, 52, 57  
   region, 64  
 Chalcone synthase, 91, 96  
 Chemical content, taro, 22  
 Chicago, Illinois, 13  
 Chicken soup, 13  
 Chickens, 8  
 Child, first, xxiii  
 Child, second, xxiii  
 Chilling  
   flower bud induction, 190–191  
   flower induction, *Phalaenopsis*,  
   200  
 Chimeric plants, 104  
 China, 173  
 Chinese, 28  
   dynasties, 263  
   *Materia Medica*, 213  
   pharmacology, 213–279  
 Chlorazol black, 132  
 Chlorine, 255  
 Chloroplast  
   genome, 84, 87, 84  
   gene *rbcl*, 87  
   genes, 87  
 Christianity, 17  
 Chromatin, 78  
 Chromocenters, 80  
   DNA, foreign, 99  
 Chromosomes, 92  
   host, 99  
   numbers, 75, 90  
   evolution, 90  
   high, 90  
 Cinnamic acid, 241  
 Cisternae, 62  
 Cladogram  
   chloroplast DNA, 84  
   *Dendrobium*, 84, 85, 84  
 Clamp connections, 129, 130  
 Classical music, 2  
 Claw, 221  
 Clinandrium, 224, 225  
 Clofibrilic acid, 296  
 CMA, 127, 130  
 CO<sub>2</sub>  
   enrichment, 200  
   photosynthetic rate, 179  
   uptake, 179, 197  
     day length, effects on, 198,  
     199  
     temperature effects on, 197,  
     198  
 Cobalt, 255  
 Cochinchina, 214  
 Coconut water, see CW  
 Coenzyme A, 241  
 Color forms, 92  
 Column (gynostemium), 91  
 Communal farms, 8  
 Communists, 7  
 Community pot, 175  
 Compost, 194  
 Concentration camps, 6  
 Confocal microscopy, 32  
 Conidia, 154–157, 161–163  
   bicelled, 161, 162  
 Conidiogenous apparatus, 163  
 Conidiophores, 154, 155, 161, 162  
 Contributors, xv–xvii  
 Corn meal agar, see CMA  
 Cornell University Press, xxiii, 25,  
   26  
 Cortex, 221, 222  
 m-Coumaroyl-coenzyme A, 241  
 Crassulacean acid metabolism, 19

- light intensity effects, 199  
*Phalaenopsis*, 197  
 Creation, teaching, 17  
 Crepidamine, 252  
 Crepidine, 252  
 Crops, cycle, 9  
 Crystal, 222  
 Cultivars, *Cymbidium*  
   miniature, 177  
   standard, 177, 180  
 Cultivation, conditions, 318  
   England, pre-1900, 318  
   epiphytic orchids, 318  
   terrestrial orchids, 318  
 Cuticle, 222  
 CW,  
   oriental *Cymbidium*, effects on,  
   295  
   *Phalaenopsis*, effects on, 298  
     flower-stalks, 301  
     lateral buds, 303  
     leaf segments, 299  
   protoplasts, effects on, 306  
 Cyanidin-3-diglucoside, 184  
 Cytogenetics, 75  
 Cytokinins  
   endogenous, *Cymbidium*, 295  
   see under each individual  
   compound,  
 Cytology, 75  
   attributes, 82  
 Cytoplasm, 39, 40, 52, 56, 62, 44  
   differentiation, 53  
   separation, 54  
   polarization, 40  
   reduction, 46  
 Cytoplasmic epidermis, 35  
 Czechoslovakia, 6  
  
 DAF, see DNA amplification  
   fingerprinting  
 Danube, 1, 5, 6, 28, 29  
 Day length  
   bud sprouting, effects on, 187  
   CO<sub>2</sub> uptake, effects on, 198, 199  
   *Phalaenopsis* flowering, effects  
   on, 201  
 Dedication, ii, xxvi  
   biographies, xix–xxii  
   photographs, xxii  
 Dehydroorchinol, 278  
 Denbinobin, 255  
 Dendramine, 254, 253, 254  
   toxicity, 277  
   effects, 277  
     on humans, 278  
   lethal dose, minimal, 277  
 cis-Dendrochrysine, 253  
 trans-Dendrochrysine, 253  
 Dendrorepine, 252  
 Dendroxine, 255  
 Denticles, 161, 162  
 Diandrous orchids, bisporic  
   pattern, 46  
 Dictyosomes, 52, 63  
 Difco, 127  
  
 Dihydro-m-coumaroyl-coenzyme  
   A, 241  
 Dihydrophenanthrene, 241  
 Diploid embryos, 39  
 Disease  
   diagnostics, 107  
   resistance, 97, 106, 107  
 Disneyland, California, 28  
 Divine Husbandman's Classic of  
   the Chinese *Materia Medica*,  
   213  
 Division  
   anticlinal, 38  
   in epidermis, 35, 36  
   meiotic, 39, 40, 42, 43, 49, 51, 37  
     first, 42, 49, 40, 41, 44, 47  
     last, 47  
     preparation for, 43  
   second, 46, 49, 52, 56, 45, 47  
   mitotic, 38, 42, 57, 58, 36  
     first, 45  
   nuclear, 45  
   periclinal, 38, 64  
 DNA  
   A + T content, 79, 80, 82  
   amplification, 82, 105  
     fingerprinting, 105, 106  
   analysis, 83  
   ban polymorphism, 105  
   base sequences, 79  
   binding, 91  
   buoyant density, 78, 79  
   C values, 76–78, 81, 106  
   fungus infected cells, 77  
   cDNA, 91, 93, 94, 96  
   chloroplast, 83  
   cpDNA, 83, 85  
   delivery, pollen tube mediated,  
     97  
   diploid cells, 76, 78  
   DNA interactions, 91  
   embryos, 76  
   endonuclease-restricted, 102  
   fingerprinting, 107  
   foreign chromosomal  
   integration, 99  
   G + C content, 78, 79, 82, 83  
   genome composition, 80  
   genomic, 102, 103  
     markers, 105  
   heterochromatin, 78, 80, 83  
   information, orchids, 78, 79  
   main band, 78  
   melting, 79  
   meristematic nuclei, 76  
   non-coding, 83  
   nuclear, 32, 38, 75–78, 80  
   nucleotide base sequence, 83  
   optical density, 79  
   parenchyma cells, 76  
   phosphate groups, 82  
   plasmid, 97, 102  
   plastid, 83  
   pollen-tube transfer, 98  
   protocorm content, 82  
   quantification, 76  
  
   quantity per genome, 76  
   rDNA, 79  
   repetitive, 78, 83  
   ribosomal, 87  
   RNA interactions, 91  
   satellite, 78, 79, 83  
     renaturation, 80  
   sequence comparison, 87  
   synthesis, 77, 81  
   T-DNA insertion, 105  
   tetraploid cells, 76  
   total, 78  
   transfer, 98  
 Dog, little black, 6  
 Dolipore, 130, 131  
 Dorsal sepal, 221–225  
 Durian, 28  
 Dyad  
   chalazal, 56  
   degenerating, 53  
   division, 46, 48  
   functional member, 49, 48  
   micropylar, 38, 36, 37, 45  
     degenerating, 36  
     undivided cell, 46  
   nonfunctional member, 48  
   stage, 40  
   unequal, 36  
 Dyads  
   callose in walls, 49  
   functional, 42  
 Dynasties, Chinese, 263  
  
 Ecology, marine, 16  
 Editors, xxiii  
   Associate, xiii, xxiv, 1  
   Board, of, xiii  
 Egg  
   apparatus, 57, 48, 55  
   cell, 33, 54, 62, 48, 56, 63  
   cytoplasm, 63, 55  
 Electroinjection, 97, 98, 100, 103  
   electrical capacitance, 104  
   potassium buffer, 104  
 Electrophoresis, 88, 98  
 ELISA, 99  
 Emasculation, 93  
   transcriptional response, 93  
 Embryo  
   diploid, 39  
   meristem, 104  
   binucleate, 54, 56, 47, 48  
   bisporic, 57, 59–61  
   cells, reduction, 58  
   cytoplasm, 48  
 Embryo sac, 31–33, 39, 43, 46, 56,  
   63, 37, 47  
   development, 31, 33, 53, 59, 60,  
   37, 48  
   bisporic, 33, 56  
   cell size, 51  
   *Cypripedium passerinum*, 56, 37,  
   48  
   different types, coexistence,  
   59–61, 66  
   eight-nucleate, 56, 57, 59, 62

- epiphytic species, 61
- fertilization, prior to, 55
- fertilization, time of, 55, 56
- formation, 39, 43, 46
  - nuclei, participation in, 50
- four-nucleate, 54, 56, 57, 62, 65, 48, 56
- mature, 39, 56, 57, 62, 56
- monosporic, 33, 54, 57, 59
- nine-nucleate, 58
- nuclei, 57
  - number, 56, 57
  - reduction, 57, 58
- organization, 32
- seven-celled, 57, 62
- seven-nucleate, 59
- six-nucleate, 56, 57, 65
- temperate species, 61
- terrestrial species, 61
- tetrasporic, 57, 59–61
- tropical species, 61
- two-nucleate, 54, 47, 48
- Embryo sacs, 39
- Embryology, orchid, 32
- Embryos, adventive, 65
- Endodermis, 221, 222
- Endomembranes, 52
  - Gastrodia elata*, 228–230
- Endophytes, 129
  - in situ*, 132, 134
  - isolates vs in host, 132, 134
  - peloton-forming, 130
  - resident in or on roots, 126
- Endoplasmic reticulum, 39, 62, 64
- smooth, 63
- Endopolyploid cells, 77
- Endoreplication, 75, 76, 81, 90
- England, 5, 317
  - graveyard of tropical orchids, 317
  - orchid growers, 317
- Enzymes
  - GUS, 99
  - hydrolytic, 46
  - inducible, 107
  - leaves, 90
  - variations, 87
- Epidermis, 221, 222
  - cells, division, 36
- Epidermis, cytoplasmic, 35
- Epigenetic factors, 87
- Epiphytic orchids 317
  - introduction, 317
  - England, 317
  - Europe, 317
- Esterase, 46
  - isozymes, 89
- Ethanol, 126
- Ethephon, 184
- Ethylene
  - action
    - GA effects on, 184
    - silver thiosulfate effects on, 184
  - biosynthesis
    - genes, 94
    - pollinated flowers, in, 94
    - regulation, 94
    - ACC synthase, 96
    - interorgan regulation, 94
    - pollen-derived signal, 94
  - bud blasting, cause of, 184
  - enzyme regulation, by, 93
  - evolution, 94
    - Cymbidium shoots, from, 296
  - ovary maturation, and, 93
  - ovule differentiation, and, 93
  - post-pollination phenomena, induction, 93
  - post-pollination production, 96, 94
  - precursor, 94
  - production, 94, 95
  - senescence, effects on, 94
  - sensitivity, 94, 95, 107
  - synthesis, 93
    - GA effects on, 184
- Europe, 8
- Evolution, 75
  - teaching, 17
- Exodermis, 222
- Factory, shirt, Russe, Bulgaria, 5
- Family, Rau, 14, 15
- Farm school, 8
- Father, single J. Arditti to son
  - Jonathan, 27
- Fertilization, 193, 202–204
  - pseudobulb growth, 194
  - major elements, 193
  - nitrogen, 193, 194
- Fertilization of plants, 31
  - shoots, effects on, 193
  - timing, 194
- Fertilizers, 185, 203, 204
- Feulgen
  - microdensitometry, 76, 78
  - stain, 77
- Fiber (or fibre), 318, 222
- Fiji islands, 22
- Filament, nucellar, 38, 39, 35–37
- Filiform apparatus, 62, 55
- Finacial support, iii
- Firefly luciferase, 100
- Flagstaff, Arizona, 17
- Flavonoids, 91
  - diversity, 83
- Flora of Japan by C. Thunberg, 214
- Flora Sari Orchids, Jakarta, 20
- Floral
  - biology, 90–96
    - post-pollination, 92
  - buds, 91
  - color, 96, 97, 107
    - genetic markers, 105
    - novel, 103
  - development, 90, 91
  - environmental factors, affecting, 90
  - genetic factors, affecting, 90
  - genotype, 92
  - life span, 34, 94
  - longevity, 107
  - mutants, 90
  - organogenesis, 90, 91
  - underside, 221
- Floriculture professor at UCLA, 14
- Flower Grower magazine, 9
- Flowering, 4
  - Phalaenopsis*, BAP effects on, 201
    - day length effects on, 201
    - illumination effects, on, 201
  - light effects
    - Phalaenopsis*, 200, 201
  - stages, 91
- Flowers, 215–226, 228
  - bud
    - differentiation, 175, 182
    - appearance, 182
    - development, 183, 190
    - development vs carbohydrate content, 190
    - induction, 190, 191
    - post-induction development, 191, 193
    - temperature effects on, 182
  - coloration, 184
  - induction, 175
    - artificial light effects, 200
    - BAP effect, 191, 201
    - Cymbidium*, 192
    - GA effect, 201
    - nobile*-type *Dendrobium*, 192
    - Phalaenopsis*, 192, 200, 201
  - life span, 34, 94, 107
  - light effects, 193
  - malformation, 184
  - mature, 91
  - pink, 105
  - stalks, 177
  - temperature effects on, 193
- Fluorescent staining, 40, 41
- Folic acid, *Phalaenopsis* leaf segments, effects on, 300
- Food
  - Chinese, 27
  - Indonesian-Malay, 27
  - Malay-Indonesian, 27
- Foot, 224, 225
- Forced labor, father (SJA), 6
- Foreigner's Laboratory, Bogor, 24
- Fox and sour grapes, 5
- Fragrance, 106
- France, 11
- Free radical scavenging, 277
- Fructose, 179
  - Armillaria mellea*, 228
- Fundamentals of Orchid Biology*, 27
  - award, 26
- Fungi, xxv
  - binucleate strains, 130
  - colonial, 154, 155
  - colors, 129, 130

- isolates, characteristics, 129, 128, 129
- isolates vs morphology in host, 132, 134
- maintenance of cultures, 129
- morphology in host vs isolates, 132, 134
- multinucleate cells, 132
- orchid mycorrhizas, 117–170
- resident on, or in roots, 126
- rhizosphere, 127
- root-dwelling, 130
- sexual states, 131
- soil, 127
- spores, 129
- sporogenous cells, 129
- storage, 129
- taxonomy of genera, 135–153, 156–164
- Fungicides, 298
- Fungus infection, 107
- GA
  - A + T content, effect on, 82
  - bud blasting, effect on, 183, 184
  - chromocenter enlargement, 81
  - differentiation, and, 289
  - G + C content, effect on, 82
  - organogenesis, effect on, 286
  - PLB effect on, 82
- Gametophyte
  - developing, 58
  - female, 58, 62
- Garden in Russe house, 4
- Gardener's Chronicle*, 317
- Gastrodin, 256
- GD medium, 300–302
- Gene
  - expression, 75, 91
  - gun, 98, 101, 102, 103
  - products, 87
  - sequences, 92
- Genes
  - ACC oxidase, 93
  - ACC synthase, 93
  - agamous, 91
  - anthocyanin, 91, 92
  - bar, 101
  - duplication, 102
  - expression, 92, 93, 96, 97
  - transient, 99
  - vectors, 97
  - foreign, 99
  - gun, 98, 101, 102, 103
  - GUS, 99, 100
  - gusA*, 99
  - homeotic, 90, 91
  - horticultural interest, of, 97
  - identification, 105
  - introduction, 92
  - multiple insertion, 102
  - mutations, 92
  - orchid, 96
  - pigment, 91, 92
  - pool, 96
  - products, 102
  - promoter, 92
  - random assortment, 31
  - regulatory, 92
  - reporter, 99, 100, 103
  - sequences, 105
  - products, 91
  - tagging, 105
  - transfer, 92, 96–105, 101
  - methods, 100
  - transgenes, 99
  - vector, 92
- Genetic
  - engineering, 92, 97, 99, 102, 101
  - identities, 88
  - linkage maps, 105
- Genetics, 75
- molecular, 90
- Genocide, 8
- Genome, 75
  - chloroplast, 83, 83
  - composition, 80
- Genomic
  - breeding, 105
  - DNA, 105
  - markers, 105, 106
- Genotypes, 97
- Germ pore, 142, 143
- Germany, 5, 6, 24
- Gibberellic acid, see GA
- Gibberellins, see GA
- Glossary
  - Appendix, 359, 360
  - Chapter 2, 67, 68
  - Chapter 3, 107–111
  - Chapter 4, 164–166
  - Chapter 5, 204, 205
  - Chapter 7, 309, 310
- Glucomannan, 189, 190
- Glucose, 179
- Glycine, 295
  - Phalaenopsis* leaf segments, effects on, 300
- Glycosides, 256
- Gold particles, 102
- G-proteins, 95
- Grapevine exudate, 5
- Gravel, 185
- Greyhound bus, 12
- Growing plants, 317
- Growth
  - Cymbidium*, 174–185
  - habits
    - Cymbidium*, 176
    - nobile-type *Dendrobium*, 195
    - Phalaenopsis*, 196–204
    - role in ovule initiation, 34
- GTP-binding, 95
  - microsomal membrane protein, to, 95
  - proteins, 95
- Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, 21, 22
- GUS, 99, 100, 102, 103, 103
  - expression, 104
  - protocorms, in, 104
  - staining, 104
- Gynoecium, 93
  - post-pollination changes, 93
- Gynostemium, 91, 93, 220–226
- Gynostemium foot, 224, 225
- Haifa, city of, Israel, 8
- Haimowitch family, 2
- Han period, 213
- Hapu, 318
- Hapuu, 318
- Harvesting vegetables, 9
- Helium gas pressures, 102, 103
- Heller's medium, see Hr medium
- Henderson Airfield, Solomon Islands, 21
- Herbal medicine, Chinese
  - alkaloids, orchid, and, 277, 278
  - approaches to, 274–276, 278, 279
  - orchid alkaloids, and, 277, 278
  - pharmacological approach, 275
  - phytoalexins, and, 278
  - practice of, 274–276
  - superoxide, and, 276, 277
  - traditional approach, 275, 276
- Herbal medicines (i. e., drugs)
  - Chinese, 213, 214, 258–263, 215–230
  - official (Kuah-yuêh), 214
  - pills, 214
  - Qi (temperature) characteristic, 275, 276
  - taste, 275
  - tinctures, 214
  - wild (Tsao-yuêh), 214
- Herbal medicines, orchid, 213, 214, 258–262, 278, 279, 215–230
  - conditions treated, 258–274
  - formulations, 258–274
  - medicinal effects, 258–274
  - preparations, 258–274
  - use of, 258–274
  - effects, 258–274
- Herbal prescriptions, 213, 214
- Herbicide resistance, 101
- Heterochromatin
  - amplification, 81
  - hairs differentiation, 81
  - PLB, 80, 81
  - variation, 77, 78, 80, 81
- Histone
  - nuclear protein, 82
- History of biology, 16, 17, 21
- History of orchid seed
  - germination, 21
- Holocaust, 8
- Holon, Israel, 8, 9
- Honiara, Solomon Islands, 21
- Hormonal signals, 43
- Hortus Botanicus Bogoriensis*, 24
- Hr medium, 298
- Hybrid registration, 106
- Hybridization, 97, 107
  - sexual, 92, 97

- Hybrids, 106  
 Hydrogel, 194  
 Hydrogen peroxide, 126  
 p-Hydroxybenzaldehyde, 248  
 p-Hydroxybenzoic acid, 248  
 p-Hydroxybenzyl alcohol, 256  
 p-Hydroxybenzyl aldehyde, 256  
 p-Hydroxybenzyl ethyl ether, 256  
 Hyperglycemia, 254, 277  
 Hyphae, 133, 137, 149, 152  
   advancing, 130  
   aerial, 132, 139, 140, 142, 143  
   characteristics, 129, 128, 129  
   coaxial aggregates, 129  
   culture of, 127  
   intracellular, 117  
   nuclear number, 130  
   vegetative, 163  
   width, 129  
 Hypochlorite, calcium or sodium, 126  
 Hypodermis, 222  
 Hyponex medium, see H medium  
  
 IAA  
   chromocenter enlargement, 81  
   shoot formation, 286  
 IBA  
   oriental *Cymbidium*, effects on, 295  
 Illumination, flower bud induction, 191  
 Immunology, 75  
 Imported orchids, survival in England, 318  
 Importing orchids, 318  
   into England, 318  
   see Epiphytic orchids, introduction, 318  
 Independence day, USA, xxiv  
 Indexer 2, xxvi  
 Indian orchids, 32  
 Indians, American, 28  
 Indoctrination in Israel, 8  
 Indole-3-acetic acid, see IAA  
 Indoleacetic acid, see IAA  
 Indolebutyric acid, see IBA  
 Indonesia, 7, 20, 24, 28, 29  
 Inflorescences, 175, 222, 226, 228  
   blasting, 183  
   GA effects, 183  
   silver thiosulfate effects, 183  
   development, 175  
   emerging, 91, 177  
   fructose content, 179  
   glucose content, 179  
   growth of, 181  
   number, 182, 183  
   sucrose content, 179  
   sugar content, 179  
 Inquisition, 6  
 Instant coffee smuggled to JA's parents in Israel, 13  
 Integuments, 39, 64, 65  
   inner, 64, 36, 37, 40, 41, 53  
   functions, 65  
   outer, 64, 37, 40, 41, 48  
 International Orchid Registration Authority, Royal Horticultural Society, 106  
 Internodes, 220  
 Intron, 92  
 Irises blooming, 4  
 Iron, 255  
 Isozymes, 87–90, 89, 90  
   analysis, 88, 89  
   differences, 89, 90  
   diversity, 87, 88  
   esterase, 89  
   evolution, 87  
   hybrid identification, 88–90  
   markers, 106  
   peroxidase, 90  
   species identification, 88–90  
   subspecies classification, 89  
   systematics, 87  
   variation, 106, 90  
 Israel, 6–10, 27  
   customs, 13  
   military service, 10  
   raising children, 8  
   socialist government, 14  
   war of independence, 9  
   women pioneers, 8  
 Istanbul, Turkey, 7  
 Italy, 6  
  
 Jaffa, 8  
 Jakarta, Indonesia, 20  
 Japan, xxv, 97, 171–204  
   cultivation, 174–177  
   *Cymbidium*, 174–185  
   Mountain technique  
   *nobile*-type *Dendrobium*, 186–196  
   *Phalaenopsis*, 196–204  
   Yama-age, 175  
   orchid plantlet sources, 174, 175  
   orchid research, 174  
   pot plants production, 171, 172, 172  
   potted orchid production, 171, 172, 174, 172, 173  
 Japanese, 28  
 Japanese orchids, 32  
 Jerusalem, ship, 12  
 Jewish settlers in Israel, 8  
 Jews, 6, 9  
 Jobs, part time, 12  
  
 Kanamycin, 100, 103, 104  
 Kebun Raya, 24  
 $\text{KH}_2\text{PO}_4$ , 302  
 Kinetin, 295, 296  
   plantlet growth, effect on, 307  
   PLB, effects on, 303, 307  
 Kirov Opera, Leningrad, USSR, 7  
 Kites, 5  
 Knee ailment (JA), 10  
 $\text{KNO}_3$ , 302  
 Knudson C medium, 286, 289, 290, 303, 306  
 Korea, 97  
 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, xxvi  
 Kyoto medium, 290  
  
 Labellum (see also lip), 220–226  
 Laboratorium Treub, Bogor, Indonesia, 24  
 Land of the Free (USA), 29  
 Laser  
   flow cytometry, 78  
   microscopy, 32  
 Lateral sepals, 223–226  
 Latin, 317  
   words, 317  
 Leaf, 221  
   mold, 318  
   primordia, 286  
   tip, 224, 225  
 Leaves, 91, 222  
   dry matter content, 178  
   enzymes, 318, 90  
   lower,  $\text{CO}_2$  uptake, 200  
   non-reducing sugars content, 178, 179  
   number, temperature effect on, 177  
   reducing sugars content, 178  
   sugars, 179  
   terminal, formation of, 187–189  
   upper,  $\text{CO}_2$  uptake, 200  
 Lebanon, 8  
 Lectins, mannose binding, 97, 107  
 Leningrad, 7  
 Leukemic P-388, 233, 244, 247, 248  
 Light  
   artificial, flower induction, 200, 201  
   flower bud development, 191  
   intensity  
     carbohydrate content, effects on, 179, 181, 182  
      $\text{CO}_2$  uptake, light intensity effects on, 199  
     dry matter content, effects on, 179  
     flower induction, effects on, 200  
     growth, effects on, 179  
     optimal, *Phalaenopsis*, 200  
     photosynthesis, effects on, 179  
     pseudobulbs, effects on, 179  
     sugar contents, effects on, 179  
   microscopy, 46  
 Lilacs blooming, Bulgaria, 4  
*Lindleyana*, xxiv  
 Linsmaier-Skoog medium, see LS medium  
 Lip (also see labellum), 92, 93  
 Lipid  
   droplets, 39  
   degradation, 96  
 Living in car (JA), 13  
 Loam, 317  
 Loeb Foundation scholarship (JA), 13

- Long Beach, California, 19  
 Long Island, New York, 12  
 Long Island Agricultural and Technical Institute, 12  
 Loroglossol, 278  
 Los Angeles, 10, 12  
*Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 13  
 LS medium, 295  
 Lucifer, 16  
 Luciferase, 100  
 Luciferin, 100
- Macroconidia, 156, 157  
 Macromolecules, 38  
 MADS-box, 91  
 Magnesium, 255, 291  
 Malaita, Solomon Islands, 7, 21  
 Malate dehydrogenase, 90  
 Malaya, 22  
 Malays, 28  
 Malaysia, xxvi, 22, 28  
 Malic acid, 197  
   utilization, 199  
 Malonyl-coenzyme A, 250  
 Manganese, 255  
 Mannose binding lectins, 96, 107  
 Marine animals, 17, 23  
   poisonous, 23  
   toxins, 16, 17  
 Marines, U. S., 21  
 Mass rapid clonal propagation,  
   see MRCP  
*Materia Medica* Text and  
   Commentary, 214  
 Mauki story, 21  
 Mediterranean Sea, 28  
 Media vs 'medias', 317  
 Media vs medium, 317  
 Medicine, xxv  
   Chinese, herbal, xxv  
   herbal, Chinese, xxv  
   Western, xxv  
 Medium vs 'mediums', 318  
 Medium vs media, 317  
 Medulla, 222  
 Megagametogenesis, 32, 43, 52-54,  
   56, 57  
 Megagametophyte, xxv, 51  
   development, 31-68  
   mature, 61-64  
 Megaspore  
   callose in walls, 49  
   chalazal, 46, 49, 51, 52, 45  
   degeneration, 51, 52, 45, 47, 53  
   cytoplasm, 52  
   endomembranes, 52  
   mitochondria, 52  
   nucleus, 52  
   organelles, 52  
   plastids, 52  
   vacuoles, 52  
   functional, 49, 50, 52, 54, 45, 47,  
   53  
   callose, and, 50  
   contents of, 51, 52  
   differentiation, 50  
   division, mitotic, 54  
   *Epidendrum scutella*, 53  
   first meiotic division, 47  
   size of, 51  
   vacuoles, 53  
   haploid, 51  
   linear tetrad, 46  
   micropylar, 52, 45  
   mother cells, 33  
   formation, 94  
   nonfunctional, 52, 45, 47  
   dictyosomes, 52  
   nucleus, division, mitotic, 54  
 Megasporocyte, 40, 42, 36, 37, 43,  
   44  
   appearance after pollination, 40,  
   41  
   callose function, 50  
   callose in walls, 49  
   meiosis, 46  
   walls, callose, in, 51  
 Megasporogenesis, 32, 40, 43, 46,  
   49-51, 64  
   bisporic pattern, 46  
   callose deposition, 50  
   monosporic pattern, 46  
   nutrient distribution, 50  
 Meiosis, 51  
   microsomal, 95  
 Mercuric chloride, 126  
 Messrs Lodigges, UK orchid  
   nursery, 214, 264  
 Metabolites, secondary, 107  
 Microorganism interactions, 107  
 Microparticle bombardment, 92,  
   97, 102, 103, 101  
 Microprojectile bombardment,  
   102  
 O-Methylbatatasin, 251  
 Micropropagation, 186  
*Micropropagation of Orchids*, 20,  
   26  
 Micropylar  
   end, 54, 58, 62, 53  
   nuclei, 54, 57, 58, 55, 56  
 Micropyle, 62, 64, 55  
 Microscopy, 59  
 Microsomal membranes, 95  
   petal, 95  
 Microspectrofluorometry, 77  
 Microtubules, 39, 40, 52, 62  
   perinuclear, 54  
 Mikve Israel agricultural school,  
   9, 11  
 Military service, Israel (JA), 10  
 Mitochondria, 39, 46, 52, 62, 63,  
   63  
 Mold, 318  
 Molecular biology, xxv, 75-115  
   developmental study, 91  
   floral physiology, and, 76  
   flowering, of, 107  
   orchids, of, 106  
   phylogeny, and, (see also  
   Phylogeny), 76  
   pigments, of, 92  
   plant breeding, and, 76, 97  
   senescence, of, 107  
   systematics, and (see also  
   Systematics and Taxonomy),  
   76  
   techniques, 32  
 Molecular breeding, 96-105  
 Molecular genetics, 90  
 Molecular physiology, 92, 107  
   plant breeding, of, 97, 103  
 Molecular systematics, xxv  
   taxonomy, 106  
 Monandrous orchids, monosporic  
   pattern, 46  
 Moniloid cells, 129, 130, 132, 143,  
   128, 129, 139-142, 147  
 Monosporic, 50-61  
   pattern, 33, 46, 65  
   callose in walls, 49  
   callose, role of, 50  
   linear tetrad, 51  
   monandrous orchids, 46  
 Morphogenesis, 75  
 Morphology attributes, 82  
*Ceratorhiza*, 139, 140  
*Epulorhiza*, 141, 142  
   floral physiology, 88  
 Moss, 318  
 Mould (also see mold), 318  
 Mount Baldy, California, 28  
 Mount Carmel, Israel, 28  
 Mount Faber, Singapore, 28  
 Mountain technique, see  
   Yama-age  
 MRCP, 174  
   culture media (also see under  
   each medium)  
   aeration, 293  
   sugar content, 293  
   culture vessels, 292  
   fluorocarbon polymer, 292  
   glass, 292  
   plastic, 292  
*Cymbidium*, 174, 285-296  
*Doritaenopsis*, 306, 307  
   mutations, 308  
   hormones (also see under  
   individual compounds),  
   289-290  
   hormones, mutations, and, 289  
   ionic balance in media, 290, 291,  
   292  
   mutations, 308, 309  
*Neofinetia falcata*, 306, 307  
*nobile*-type *Dendrobium*,  
   296-297  
   node cultures, 296  
   organic additives, see each  
   additive  
   oriental *Cymbidium*  
   rhizome formation, 294, 295  
   rhizome growth, 294-296  
   shoot formation, 295  
*Phalaenopsis*, 297-310  
   culture conditions, 298  
   flower-stalk

- node culture, 297–299
- sterilization, 297, 298
- tips, 301–302
- illumination, 298, 300, 301
  - leaf segments
    - culture, 299–301, 300
    - light effects, 299
    - temperature effects, 299
- nitrogen concentration, effects, 299
- PLB from leaf segments, 299–301, 300
- shoot formation, 298
- temperature effects, 299, 301
- upper internodes, 301, 302
- lateral buds, 302, 303
  - callus from, 303
  - media for (table), 304, 305
- mutations, 308
- plantlets
  - multiplication in vitro, 306
- protoplasts, 306, 307
  - friable callus, 306
  - isolation, 307
- root tips, 302
  - surface sterilization, 302
- young flower stalks, 302, 303
  - medium, 303
- plantlet growth, 307
- PLB growth, 307, 308
- shoot differentiation, 295, 296
- tissue preservation, 293, 294
  - illumination, 294
  - low temperature, 294
  - retardants, 293
- virus-free plant production, 285, 286
- mRNA, 91, 93
  - ACC synthase, 96
  - accumulation, 96
- MS medium, 289, 294, 296, 300, 303
  - modified, 302
- Mt. Salak, Bogor, Indonesia, 28
- Mt. St. Mary's College, 17
- Mucilage, 222
- Murashige-Skoog medium, see MS medium
- Mushrooms, 135
- Music, classical, 27, 28
- Music, Western, 27, 28
- Mutations, somaclonal, 285
- Mycelial strands, 129
- Mycelium, 163
  - aerial, 139, 140
  - mat, 139, 140, 142, 143
  - sterile, 130
- Mycobionts, 117
- Mycorrhiza, 24
- Mycorrhiza, orchid
  - ascomycetous fungi, 156, 157
  - Basidiomycetes, 142, 143
    - sterile, 147
  - colonial fungi, 154, 155
  - conidial fungi, 156, 157, 161–163
  - endophytes, 125–127
  - fungi, 118–125, 128, 129
    - Gastrodia elata*, 228–230
    - isolation of fungi, 125–134
    - key to Ascomycotina, 153, 154, 156
    - key to Basidiomycotina, 134, 135
    - key to Fungi Imperfecti, 153, 154, 156
    - screening of isolates, 129
    - taxonomy of genera, 135–153, 156–164
  - N<sup>6</sup>-benzyl adenine, see BA
  - N<sup>6</sup>-benzylaminopurine (BAP) see BA
  - NAA
    - differentiation, and, 289
    - effect on plantlet growth, 307
    - effect on PLB growth, 307
    - explant growth, and, 287
    - multiplication, and, 289
    - oriental *Cymbidium*, effects on, 294–296
    - Phalaenopsis*, effect on, 298
      - root tips, 302
      - flower-stalks, 301
      - lateral buds, 303
      - leaf segments, 299–301
    - PLB, effects on, 303
    - root formation, effects on, 290
    - shoot formation, effects on, 286
- Naphthaleneacetic acid, see NAA
- National Science Foundation, USA, 18
- Nations, 27
- Nazis, 7
- Nectarines, 13
- Neo* gene, 103
- New Dogashima medium, 303
- New South Wales, Australia, 20
- New York, 12
- NH<sub>4</sub>NO<sub>3</sub>, 302
- Niacin, 16, 18
  - Phalaenopsis* leaf segments, effects on, 300
- Nikon cameras, 2
- Nitrate, 290, 291
- Nitsch's minor elements, 295
- Nobilomethylene, 255
- Nobilonine, 254
- Node, 221
  - nuclear protein, 82
- North America, 214
- Northern blot, 91, 93, 99
- Nucellar
  - cells, 52
  - epidermis, 39, 64, 65, 48, 53
  - filament, 38, 39, 35–37
  - tissue, resorbed, 39
- Nucellus, 38, 39, 64, 40, 41
- Nuclear
  - degeneration, 58
  - diploid, 57
  - discovery of, 75
  - division, 54
- DNA, 80
- envelope, 42, 43, 44
- epidermis, 23
- haploid, 57
- isolation, 78
- macromolecules, 76
- membrane, 64
- meristematic DNA content, 77
- number, 58
- proteins, 82
- staining, 63, 78
- Nuclei, also see nucleus, 50
- Nucleic acids, 76
- Nucleotide sequence, 87
- Nucleus, 39, 40, 42, 52, 63, 37, 44, 55, 63
  - division, 47
  - formation, 45
  - heterochromatin, 80
  - meiotic, 46
  - polar, 48
  - position, 42
- Nutrients, 49
  - distribution, 50
  - flow, 43
  - uptake, 40
  - Pacific, 7
- Oil fields, Ploesti, Rumania, 5
- Okadaic acid,
  - inhibitor of acid phosphatase, 96
  - wilting induced by, 96
- Opera, 7
- Orchid Chinese herbal medicine, and, 277
  - effects on humans, 278
- Orchid Album*, 15
- Orchid anatomy, 23
- Orchid Biology: Reviews and Perspectives*, xxiii–xxv, 1, 20, 21, 25, 33
- Dedications, 25
- previous volumes (I–VI)
  - contents, 363–366
- Orchid
  - development, 21, 23
  - embryology, 23
  - flowers, 19
  - grower, JA working for, 14
  - herbal medicines, see Herbal medicines, orchid
  - history, biographies, 21
  - tissue culture, of, 21
  - hosts
    - Antidesma ghaerembilla*, 345
    - calabash, 345
    - frangipanni, 345
    - New Guinea, 345
    - teak, 345
  - morphology, 23
  - mycorrhiza, also see Mycorrhiza, orchid, 24
  - physiology,
    - research, 18–21
  - seedlings, photosynthesis, 23

- seeds, 19, 20
  - germination, 19
  - charcoal effects, 20
  - research in Bogor, 20
  - American, 7
- Orchids of Indonesia, 20
- Orchids used in herbal medicines,
  - descriptions of plants, uses and preparations, 214, 264–274
- Orchinol, 278
- Organelle movement, 42
- Organelles, 39, 40, 42, 46, 63, 64
  - membrane-bound, 46
- Organelles, polar distribution, 42
- Orient Express, 7
- Ornithology, 8
- Orphans, 8
- Osmunda, 323
  - medium for epiphytic orchids, 323
- Osmundine, 324
- Ovary, 221, 223
- Ovary, 93
- Ovary development, 32, 33, 34, 59, 60, 92, 35
  - stimulation, 34
  - immature, 92
  - structure, 38
- Ovular
  - primordium, 38, 64
  - tissues, 38
- Ovule, xxv, 48, 53, 56, 221
- Ovule development, 49, 92
  - anthesis, after, 34
  - anthesis, time of 33–38
  - auxin requirement, 34
  - Calypso bulbosa*, 36, 47, 56
  - effects of environment, 34
  - Epidendrum ibaguense*, 35, 40, 45, 55
  - epiphytic species, 34, 38
  - ethylene requirement, 34
  - future prospects, 65–67
  - genetic regulation, 94
  - growth habit, and, 34
  - growth regulator effects, 66
  - history, 31, 32
- Ovule differentiation, 94
  - genetic regulation, 94
  - initiation, 31–68, 92, 45, 56
  - light microscopy, 35–37
  - molecular aspects, 66
  - pollination, after, 38
  - terrestrial species, 34, 38
- Ovule
  - growth, pollination effects, 34
  - mature, 39
  - primordia, 38
- Ovules, 64, 92
  - integument, 64
  - single, 64
  - mature, 33
  - production, 31
  - rudimentary, 31
  - size, 31
- P medium, 306
- Pacific Ocean (Blue Pacific), 7, 28, 29
- Palestine, 6, 7, 9
- Parasites, 127
- Parenchyma, 222
- Parenthesomes, 130
- Parishin, 256
- Particle bombardment, 98, 100, 102, 103
- PCR, 83, 99, 102
- PDA, 127, 129, 130
- Peat, 202, 317
- Peat moss, 185
  - granulation, 194
  - polyvinylalcohol addition, 194
- Peloton-forming fungi, 130
- Pelotons, 117, 127
- Pelotons, 133
  - cortical, 127
  - fungi, from, 127
  - plating of, 127
- Pentachloronitrobenzene, 298
- Pentachloronitrobenzene (PCNB), 298
- Pên-tso Kang-mu, 214
- Peptide, 42 Kda, 95
- Peptone, 290, 303, 306, 307, 309
- Perianth segments, 93, 221
- Perinuclear microtubules, 54
- Periscopes, 18
- Perithecium, 156, 157
- Peroxidase isozymes, 90
- Peroxisomal acyl-Co-A oxidase, 96
- Petals, 91, 92, 220, 222, 224, 225
- Pharmacology
  - Chinese, 213–279
  - Western, 213–279
- Phenanthrenes, various
  - (structures, table 6-1), 235–257
- Phenanthraquinone, 255
- Phenolics, 257
- Phenotypes, 90
- Phialides, 154, 155, 161–163
- Phloem, 222
- Phosphatase
  - acid, 46
- Phosphate, 291
- Phosphorylation, protein, 95, 96
- Photomorphogenesis,
  - Phalaenopsis*, 196, 197
- Photomultiplier, 100
- Photosynthesis, 179
  - Phalaenopsis*, 197
  - tissue culture plantlets, 293
- Photosynthesis, orchid seedlings, 23
- Phthalide-pyrrolidine alkaloid, 277
- Phylogeny, 82
  - Acropsidinae, 86
  - Catasetinae, 85, 86
  - Cyrtopodiinae, 86
  - Cyrtopodium*, 85
  - Dendrobium*, 84, 85, 84
  - Disa tripetaloides*, 85
  - Electrophoresis-based, 88
  - Oncidiinae, 86
  - subtribes, 86
  - tetrad patterns, 66
  - Thecostelinae, 86
- Physcion, 251
- Physiology, 75
  - Araceae, 22
- Phytoalexins
  - Chinese herbal medicine, and, 18, 278
  - inhibition of
    - bacteria, 278
    - fungi, 278
    - orchid seedlings, 278
- Phytone yeast extract agar, see PYE
- Pigmentation, 92
- Pigments
  - biosynthesis, 91, 96
  - genes, 91
- Pilei, 142, 143
- Placenta, 38, 34, 35, 37, 221
- Placental
  - growth, 33
  - ridges, 38, 34, 35
  - tissue, 36
- Plant
  - breeding, 96–105
  - growth regulators, 231
  - hormones, discovery, 24
  - patents, 106
  - physiology, 21
- Plasmalemma, 62, 64
- Plasmids, 97, 100, 101
  - construct, 92, 102
- Plasmodesmata, 39, 40, 42, 51, 52, 63
  - chalazal end, at, 42
- Plastids, 39, 42, 52, 62, 63, 43, 44, 63
  - starch-containing, 40
- PLB, 77, 97, 100, 101, 103
- Cymbidium*, 285–295
- cells, 77
  - formation, 287
  - GA effects, 82
  - ionic concentration, effects of, 291
  - multiplication, 287, 288, 303, 306
  - nobile-type *Dendrobium*, 296
  - organogenesis from, 288
  - Phalaenopsis* flower-stalk internodes, from, 302
  - calcium effects, 302
  - Phalaenopsis* flower-stalk tips, from, 301–303
  - etiolation effects, 301
  - Phalaenopsis* leaf segments, from, 299–301
  - aeration effects, 301
  - illumination effects, 300, 301
  - medium, old vs new, 301
  - polyphenol oxidates, 301

- PVP effects, 301  
   species differences, 301  
   temperature effects, 301  
   multiplication, 303  
*Phalaenopsis* root tips, 302  
   Explant from, 320  
   proliferation, 288, 289  
   tissue selection, 101  
 Ploesti, Rumania, 5  
 Ploidy, 76  
   cytogenetic, 78  
 Poland, 6  
 Polar nuclei, 33, 54, 62, 63, 56  
 Polarization, 42, 51  
 Pollen, xxv  
   development, callose function, 50  
   formation, xxv  
   mother cell, 183  
   tubes, 33, 97  
     DNA delivery through, 97, 98, 100  
     hydrophilous nature, 33  
     stimulus, 33  
 Pollination  
   changes induced by, 92  
   response to, 34, 38, 92, 93, 35–37, 40, 41  
   self, 105  
   trigger for ovule development, 33, 92, 93  
 Pollinia, 220  
 Pollinium, 221  
 Polymerase chain reaction, see PCR  
 Polypeptides, 91  
   assay, 131  
 Polyploidization, 90  
 Polyploidy, 90, 105  
 Polysomes, 39  
 Polyvinylpyrrolidone, see PVP  
 Population analysis, *Corallorhiza maculata*, 85–87  
 Porometer, 19  
 Post-harvest, 19  
 Post-pollination  
   events, sequence, 93  
   gynoecium changes, 93  
   molecular biology, 93  
   petals, 96  
   phenomena, 23, 92, 95, 95  
     hormonal induction, 92  
 Potassium, 255, 290, 291  
 Potato  
   dextrose agar, see PDA  
   extract, 303, 309  
 Potting media (see also potting mixes), 317–362  
   peat, 348  
 Potting mixes, 185, 317–362  
   1920s–1950s, 358  
   1950–1970, 327–339  
   1970 to date, 339  
   *Acacallis*, 355  
   *Acineta*, 320  
   *Acropera*, 320  
   *Ada*, 320  
   *Aerides*, 320, 357  
   *Aganisia*, 320  
   *Angraecum*, 320  
   *Anguloa*, 320  
   *Ansellia*, 320  
   *Arachnis*, 352  
   *Arpophyllum*, 320  
   Australia, 346, 357  
   bark, 335–337, 339–348, 353, 357  
   bark-based, 357, 358  
   *Barkeria*, 320  
   beech leaves, 341  
   bird's nest fern, 342  
   blood meal, 357  
   bone meal, 346, 357  
   bracken fern, 343  
   brick, 345, 351  
   *Bulbophyllum*, 337, 339  
   Burma, 324, 325  
   *Calanthe*, 326, 332, 333  
   California, 342  
   *Calypso*, 357  
   *Cattleya*, 332–335, 338–341, 343, 346, 347, 354, 357  
   *Cattleya* alliance, 346  
   Celebes, Indonesia, 325  
   Ceylon, 324, 345  
   characteristics, 354, 355, 359  
   charcoal, 341, 345, 347–349, 351, 353, 354, 357  
   *Chysis*, 332, 333  
   coconut fibers, 348  
   coconut husks, 340  
   *Coelogyne*, 332, 333  
   compost, 348  
   cork, 341, 353, 357  
   Corsican pine, 346  
   crock, 346, 352  
   *Cynoches*, 332, 333  
   *Cymbidium*, 325–330, 332–334, 340–342, 347  
   *Cypripedium*, 327  
   *Dendrobium*, 331–333, 335, 339, 345, 346, 351, 352, 354  
   *Diacrium* (= *Caularthron*), 332, 333  
   *Disa*, 355  
   English, 317–324, 326, 327  
   *Epidendrum*, 331–333, 339  
   epiphytic orchids, 323, 337–339, 349–352, 354–356, 358  
   Europe, 339, 342  
   European pines, 349  
   fern, 339, 340  
   gravel, 335, 346  
   grit, 343  
   hapuu, 342, 345, 346  
   Hawaiian tree fern, 342  
   intergeneric hybrids, 347  
   Japan, 193, 202  
   Java, Indonesia, 325  
   keg of nails, 324  
   *Laelia*, 332, 333  
   lava rock, 353, 357  
   leaf mold, 341, 357  
   leaves and rotten wood, 318  
   limestone chips, 352  
   lithophytes, 351  
   loam, 339, 348, 357  
   Lomite, 340  
   *Lycaste*, 332, 333, 340, 356  
   manure, 348  
   *Masdevallia*, 337  
   mature plants, 351  
   *Miltonia*, 332, 333, 341, 347, 348  
   miniatures, 357  
   mixtures, 202  
   moss, 339  
   New Jersey, 344  
   New Zealand sphagnum moss, 353  
   NJ designations, 344  
   oak leaves, 343  
   *Odontoglossum*, 331–333, 339, 346, 347  
   oil palm, 340  
   *Oncidium*, 332, 333, 339, 356  
   orchid, 344  
   orchids, all, 348  
   osmunda, 336, 337, 339, 341–346, 353, 356, 358  
   *Paphiopedilum*, 326, 328–330, 332–334, 337, 341, 342, 344, 345, 347, 348, 351, 352, 356  
   peanut hulls, 341  
   peat, 342–344  
   peat moss, 341, 343, 353  
   *Peristeria*, 332, 333  
   perlite, 341, 343, 344, 348, 353, 357  
   pH, 353  
   *Phaius*, 326, 330, 332, 333, 355  
   *Phalaenopsis*, 328, 332, 333, 335, 339–342, 346–348, 354, 356  
   Philippines, 324  
   plastic chips, 343  
   plasting foam, 342  
   *Pleione*, 349  
   *Pleurothallis*, 337  
   polystyrene, 341, 343, 346, 348  
   pre-1900, 318–323  
   pumice, 357  
   red lava rock, 346  
   redwood, 343, 345, 349, 357  
   redwood fiber, 342, 343  
   redwood leaves, 343  
   redwood shavings, 341  
   rice hulls, 348  
   rockwool, 353, 358  
   Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 349  
   Rutgers University (see also NJ and New Jersey), 348  
   sand, 343, 346, 357  
   seedlings, 337, 341, 351  
   semi-terrestrial orchids, 323  
   semi-epiphytic orchids, 323, 324  
   shale, 353  
   shell grit, 341  
   silt sand, 341

- soil, 348
- solite, 338, 339, 348
- Sophranetella violacea*, 357
- Sophranetis*, 332, 333
- sphagnum, 357
- sphagnum moss, 336, 337, 341–343, 353
- Sri Lanka, 324, 345
- Stanhopea*, 332, 333
- sticks, 347
- stones, 347, 353
- Stryomull, 342
- Styrofoam, 348, 353
- Styropor, 341
- Sulawesi, Indonesia, 325
- sympodial orchids, 351
- synthetic, 358
- terracotta, 354
- terrestrial orchids, 323, 331, 336, 339, 347, 348, 350, 353, 355, 356, 358
- tile, 345
- tree fern, 336, 338, 341, 343, 345, 348, 352, 353
- USA, 323–325, 341
- Vanda*, 327, 328, 331–333, 335, 339–341, 347, 348, 352, 354, 357
- Vandaceous species, 346
- Vanilla*, 332, 333
- Venezuela, 340
- vermiculite, 353
- volcano cinders, 346
- water-holding capacity, 202, 353
- Prepublication review, xxv
- Professor
  - American (JA), 11
  - Floriculture, of (UCLA), 14
  - Hebrew University (arrogant), 11
- Progeny
  - F<sub>1</sub>, 105
  - F<sub>2</sub>, 105
  - segregating, 105
  - sexual, 99
- Propagation, cuttings, 186
- Prophase, 42, 44
- meiotic, 46
- Proplastids, 46
- Proteins, 38
  - antibody interactions, 91
  - G-binding, 95
  - phosphorylation, 95, 96
  - regulatory, 91
  - transgene product, 99
- Protocatechuic acid, 251
- Protocorms
  - DNA, 82
  - bombarded, 77, 97, 103
  - cells, 77
  - development, 75, 82
  - electroinjection, 103, 104
  - electrophoresis, 104
  - growth, 75
  - in vitro*, 75
  - like bodies, see PLB
  - origin of term, 24
  - proteins, 82
  - RNA, 82
  - squash, 133
- Protoplasts, 103
- Pseudobulbs, 221
  - carbohydrates, water-soluble, 189
  - control, 175, 176
  - dry matter content, 189, 190
  - glucose content, 179
  - maturation, 189
  - physiological changes, 189–190
  - mature, 175
  - sucrose content, 179
- Publication of this volume,
  - financial support for, iii
- Pumice, 185, 202
- PVP, 298, 301
- PYE, 127
- Pyridoxine, *Phalaenopsis* leaf segments, effects on, 300
- Qi, 275, 276, 279
  - superoxide, and, 279
- Queensland, 20
- Races, 27
- Raising children in Israel, 8
- Raphides, 222
- Rau family, 14, 15
- Refugee camp, 8
- Regeneration, 103
- Religions, 7
- Religious fanatics, 8
- Reproduction, sexual, 31
- Reproductive development, 32
  - suppression, 254, 277
- Restriction fragment length polymorphism, see RFLP, 105
- Resupination, 20, 21
- Reviewed scientific journals, 21
- RFLP, 105
  - analysis, 84
- Rhizoctonia* complex, 130
- Rhizomes, 220, 222
  - cortical tissue, 117
- Rhizomorphs, 129, 228, 229
- Ribonucleic acids (also see RNA), 51
- Ribosomes, 39, 62, 64
  - number, 46
- Ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate carboxylase/oxygenase, see Rubisco
- Rifampicin, 298
- Ringe and Nitsch medium, 301
- RNA, (see also ribonucleic acid), 38, 75, 82
  - messenger, 91
  - mRNA, 91, 93, 96
  - ribosomal, 79, 106
- Rockefeller Foundation, 20
- Roommates, 13
- Roots, 220–222
  - cortex, 127
    - culture of, 127
  - cortical tissue, 117
  - growth, 290
  - incubating slices, 127
  - plating slices, 127, 129
  - surface-sterilized, 126, 127
- Rotten wood, 318
- Rouschuk, Bulgaria, 1
- Royal Horticultural Society, UK, 106
- Rubisco, 87
- Rumania, 5
- Russe, Bulgaria, 1, 2, 4–6, 27, 29
- Russia, 2, 6
- Russian Army, 7
- Russians, 6
- Saddleback Mountain, California, 28
- S-adenosyl-L-methionine (SAM), 94
- Salt tolerance, taro, 22
- SAM, S-adenosyl-L-methionine, 94
- Scanning electron microscopy, 32
- Scape, 221
- Scavenging
  - antioxidant, 277
  - free radical, 277
  - properties, 279
  - superoxide, 276, 277
- Sciences, biomedical, 75
- Scientific American*, 16
- Sclerotia, 129, 128, 129, 139, 140
  - loosely organized, 132
- Scroon Lake, New York, 12
- Secondary metabolites, 107
- Sedative, 256
- Seedlings
  - calcium chloride effects, 302
  - young, 106
- Seeds, 31, 97, 100
  - germinated, 103
  - germinating, 133
  - imbibition, 97, 98, 100
- Semi-alba coloration, 92
- Senescence, 19, 94–96, 95
  - molecular biology, 107
- Sepal, dorsal, 221–226
- Sepals, 91, 220
- Septum
  - characteristics, *Rhizoctonia* group, 131
  - connections, 141, 142
  - ultrastructure, 130
- Sexual reproduction, 31
- Shading, 181
  - carbohydrate content, effects on, 181, 182
- Sheath of vascular bundle, 222
- Shen Nung Pên-tsao Ching, 213, 214
- Shih-hu, 216, 217, 225, 227
  - toxicity, 277, 253

- effects on humans, 278
- Shikimic dehydrogenase, 90
- Ship, *Jerusalem*, 12
- Shirt factory, 5
- Shoot-tip cultures
  - Cymbidium*, 285–296
  - hormone requirements, 286, 287
  - hormones, see under each
    - individual hormone
  - lateral buds, 286
  - leaf primordia, 286
  - nobile* – type *Dendrobium*, 296, 297
  - PLB production, 286
  - size of explant, 286
  - taro, 22
- Shoots, 97
  - development, 176, 177
  - dry matter, content, 178
  - etiolated, 100, 102
  - explants, 102
  - flowering, growth of, 180, 181
  - growth, 175, 176, 179
    - carbohydrate content
    - changes, 178
    - temperature, effect on, 178
  - herbicide-resistant, 101
  - maturation, 176, 183
  - reducing sugars, content, 178
  - transformed, 99
  - vegetative
    - development, 182
    - temperature, effect on, 182
- Shoot-tips, excised, 97
- Sierra Mountains, California, 28
- Sieve tube, 222
- Silica grain, 222
- Silver thiosulfate, 183, 184
- Singapore, xxiv, xxvi, 23, 25–29
- Single father (JA), 27
- Sitosterol, 255
- $\beta$ -Sitosterol, 257
- Sitosterol- $\beta$ -D-glucoside, 255
- Skin irritation, 231
- Smithtown, 12
- Socialists, 8
- Sodium amytal, 277
- Sodium hypochlorite, 126
- Sofia, Bulgaria, 1, 2
- Soil, 317
- Solomon Islands, 7, 21, 22
- Son, first child, xxiii, 27
  - American, 29
  - custody of, 27
- Sour grapes, fox and, 5
- South East Asia, 20
- South Pacific, 20
- Southern
  - blot, 91, 92, 102, 103
  - hybridization, 102
  - restriction, 102
- Spain, 6
- Sphagnum moss, 185
  - characteristics, 202
  - growth in, 194
  - water-holding capacity, 194
- Sponsor, publication of this
  - volume, iii
- Spores, 129
- Sporodochia, 132
- Sporodochium, 156, 157
- Sporogenous areas, 39
- Sporophytic information, 49
- Starch, 38, 39, 181, 182
  - grains, see starch granules, 52
  - gelatinized, 222
  - granules, 52, 62, 63, 36, 37, 44, 222
- Statue, Sir Stamford Raffles, 28
- Stem, 222, 224, 225
  - Cuttings, *Dendrobium*, 296
- Stems, 91
- Sterigmata, 139, 140, 142, 143
- Sterol glycoside, 255
- Sterols, 255
- Stigma, 93, 221, 224, 225
- Stigmatic cavity, 220, 224, 225
- Stomata, 163
- Stomatal rhythms, 19
- Striking phenomenon, 57–59
  - reverse of, 58
- Structure, Araceae, 22
- Students, 22, 23
  - graduate, 21, 22
  - undergraduate, 23
- Subepidermal cells, 35
- Succinic acid, 257
- Sucrose, 179, 257
  - concentration effects,
    - Phalaenopsis*, 299
  - Phalaenopsis* leaf segments,
    - effects on, 300
  - Phalaenopsis* root tips, effects
    - on, 302
- Sugars (also see under individual
  - names), 177–179
    - culture media, in, 293
    - metabolism, 19
- Sulawesi, Indonesia, 20
- Sulfate, 290, 291
- Sunlight, flower induction,
  - Phalaenopsis*, 201
- Superoxide
  - dismutase, 90
  - ion ( $O_2^-$ ), 276, 277
  - production, 279
  - relation to Qi, 279
  - scavenging, 276, 277
- Superpromoter, 102
- Surfactants, 19
- Symbioses, 127
- Symbiosis, 107
- Symplastic transport, 40, 42
- Synergids, 54, 62, 48, 55, 56
  - degenerating, 62
- Synthetic activity, 39
- Syria, 8
- Systematics, 82
  - chromatin composition, 83
  - DNA, 83
  - molecular, 87
  - molecular vs morphological, 88
- T medium, 290
- Taiwan, 173
- Taiwan Sugar Research Institute, 97
- Taro research, 21, 22
- Taro shoot-tip cultures, 22
- Taste, 275, 276
  - molecular, 106
- Tel Aviv, Israel, 8, 9
- Teleomorph relationships, 130
- Temperature, 1, 179
  - CO<sub>2</sub> absorption, effect on, 197, 198
  - cuttings, effect on, 186, 187
  - dry matter content, effect on, 190
  - flower bud induction, by, 190–191
  - flower buds, effect on, 175, 182, 183
  - flower induction, *Phalaenopsis*, 200
  - glucomannan content, effect on, 190
  - growth, effects on, 177, 178, 180, 181
    - high, effect on flower buds, 190
  - inflorescence blasting, 183
  - inflorescence development, 177
  - Phalaenopsis*, effects on, 196
  - sugars, effect on, 179
  - terminal leaf, effects on, 187, 188
- Tetracycline, 129
- Tetrads, 42, 50
  - linear, 51
  - T-shaped, 46
- Tetrasporic pattern, 46, 50, 61
  - callose absent, 50
- Thailand, 173
- Thailand, Bangkok, xxiii
- The Torch in my Ear* by Elias Canetti, 2
- Thiabendazole, 298
- Thiamine, *Phalaenopsis* leaf
  - segments, effects on, 300
- Thiery reaction, 44
- Thomale GD medium, see GD medium, 300
- TIBA, 296
- Timber Press, 25
- Tissue, culture, 20
  - protocols, 97
  - explant, 97
  - host, transgene expression, 99
- Tobacco, bad, honey dipped, 7
- Tracheid, 222
- Transcription, 91
  - factor, 96
  - transgene, 99
- Transcription factor, 96
  - transgene, 99
- Transformants, 101, 102, 101
  - efficiency, 99–101, 104
  - genetic, 103
  - non-chimeric, 104
  - selection

- antibiotics, 101
- herbicide resistance, 101
- light production, 101
- Transformation stability, 99
- stable, 99, 103
- tissues, 102
- Transgene expression, 92
- transcription, 99
- Transgenes, 99
- Transgenic plants, 102, 103
- Transport
  - megasporocyte to megaspore, 51
  - symplastic, 40, 42
- Travel, 27
- Tree limb support for orchids, 318
- Triad, 46, 47
- Triiodobenzoic acid, *see* TIBA
- Trinidad, 214
- Trojans (University of Southern California), 16
- Truck, old, 12, 13
- Trypan blue, 132
- Tryptone, 290, 295, 306
- Tryptophan, 18, 295
- Tsuchia medium, *see* T medium
- Tuber, 228, 229
  - Gastrodia elata*, 228, 229
  - potato, 228
- Tungsten particles, 102, 103
- Tura, JA marriage to, 26, 27
- Turkish baths, 2
- Turkish physician, 6
- Turks, 9
- U. S. Marines, 21
- UCI, *see* University of California, Irvine
- UK, 214
- Ultrastructure, 20, 32, 46
- University
  - Aberdeen, 26
  - California State, Fullerton, 17
  - California State, Los Angeles, 11
  - California, of, Davis, 22
  - California, of, Irvine, xxiv, 1, 11, 14, 16–18, 22, 25
  - California, of, Los Angeles, 9–13, 16
  - floriculture department, 10
  - California, of, Riverside, 13
  - California, of, San Diego, 17
  - Cornell, 25
  - Florida, of, xxvi
  - Hawaii, of, xxv, 23, 25, 78, 97
  - Hebrew. Rehovot (Israel), 11
  - elitist professor, 11
  - Malaya, of, Kuala Lumpur, 19, 21
  - Miami, of, Oxford, Ohio, 19
  - Northeastern, 23
  - Northern Arizona, of, 17
  - Rockefeller, 97
  - Rutgers, 348
  - Singapore, National of, xxv, 19, 23–25, 97
  - Southern California, of, xxiv, 9, 11, 14–18, 23
  - professors, 16
  - State of, New York, Stony Brook, 21
  - Sydney, 26
  - Virginia, of, 16
  - Wisconsin, of, 17
- Uptake, nutrients, 40
- USA, xxiv, 1, 4, 7, 10, 12, 14, 28, 29
  - Homeland, xxiv, 29
  - Independence Day, xxiv
- USC vs. UCLA, 16
- USC, *see* University of Southern California, 9
- USDA, 97
- USSR, 7
- Vacin and Went medium, *see* VW medium
- Vacuolation, 52, 54
- Vacuoles, 53, 62, 55, 63
  - autophagic, 46
  - central, large, 39, 40, 57, 45, 47, 48
- Vacuolization, 56
- Vancomycin, 298
- Vanillin, 257
- Vanillyl alcohol, 257
- Vascular bundle, 222
- Vascular tissue, 38, 222
- Velamen, 221, 222
- Vernalization, 4
- Vesiculation, 44
- Victoria Hall, Singapore, 28
- Vienna, Austria, 2
- Viet Nam, 214
- Vilmorin nursery, France, 11
- Vineyards, 5
- Virus
  - cymbidium mosaic, 103, 286
  - Virus diseases, 22
  - papaya ringspot, 100
  - odontoglossum ringspot, 285, 286
  - plants, free of, 285, 296
  - resistance, 107
- Vitamins, *see* separate entries for each vitamin
- Voice of America, 9
- VW medium, 290, 298–301, 306
- Waitress, Russian, 7
- Wall, 46, 40, 41, 45
  - callosic, 40, 41, 45
  - chalazal, 51
  - characteristics, 50
- Water, effects on CO<sub>2</sub> exchange, 202
- Watering, 193, 202
  - aeration, and
  - aeration, and
  - fertilizers, and, 194, 202–204
  - flowering, and, 194
  - potting mixes, and, 194
- Wei period, 213
- Western
  - analysis, 91, 102
  - blot, 99
  - medicine, 278
  - pharmacology, 213–279
- Wetting agent, 126
- White's medium, 290
- Wicker baskets, 318
- Wiley-Interscience, 25, 26
- Wilting, pollination-induced, 96
- Women pioneers in Israel, 8
- Wood, 318
  - rotten, 318
- World Orchid Conference, 5th, 19
- World War I, 9
- World War II, 2, 5–8, 21, 22, 27, 327
- Wurzburg, Germany, 24
- Xylem, 222
- Yama-age, 175, 177, 186
- Yeast extract, 290, 295
- Yin-Yang, 275, 276, 278, 279
- Zinc, 255