

Aerides odorata

By Martin Motes

Delightfully Fragrant Flowers are the Trademark of this Wide-Ranging Species

AERIDES ODORATA IS A CHARMER. Her sweetly fragrant, demurely colored cascades of gracefully presented flowers make her welcome in tropical gardens and in temperate greenhouses. *Aerides odorata* was described in 1790 by João de Loureiro in *Flora Cochinchinensis*. As the first species described, *Aer. odorata* is the type species of the genus and the entire subtribe Aeridinae (plants in this group are commonly called vandaceous and long inaccurately as Sarcanthinae). This designation is somehow especially appropriate because the species has the widest distribution of any of the Aeridinae. It ranges from eastern India, Nepal and Bhutan through most of Indochina (Yunnan, Burma [Myanmar], Laos, Cambodia and Thailand), Malaysia, Indonesia, south to Timor and east to the Philippines. Although the species has been reported from New Guinea, those plants are the closely related *Aerides quinquevulnera*. Over such a vast swath of the planet, unsurprisingly, many variants occur.



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Typical forms of *Aer. odorata* are pure creamy white with pale rosy lilac patches at the distal ends of the sepals and petals and the midlobe of the lip. The prominently spurred lip (as in all the species of section *Aerides*) surrounds and closely clasps the column. The long pendulous inflorescences can carry 40 or more flowers 1¼ inches (3 cm) across. At the northern end of its range in India and Nepal, the flowers are typically colored, but produced on plants that are somewhat more compact, a desirable quality for greenhouse growers. These forms are sometimes confusingly offered in the horticultural trade as "*Aerides lawrenceae*," though they have little resemblance to the Philippine species.

Further south in Thailand, flowers of *Aer. odorata* are typically white and lilac, but the plants are considerably larger, ranging to 5 feet (1.6 m). In the north of Thailand two forms of *Aer. odorata* occur that have been identified by Haruyuki Kamemoto as tetraploids (Kamemoto and Sagarik 1975, p. 12). These forms are much more compact and carry longer flower spikes with more numerous flowers. The color also



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[1] *Aerides odorata* is a vigorous grower well suited to naturalizing in tropical and subtropical gardens.

[2] Glossy white flowers tipped with lilac are typical of *Aer. odorata*. Grower: Martin Motes.

differs in the variety sometimes referred to as var. *bicuspidata* (Hooker 1894, p. 47; Seidenfaden and Smitinand 1959, p. 550), or in early literature as *Aerides sauvissima* (Hooker 1894, p. 47; Veitch 1963, p. 78), the flowers are concolor rose and presented on arching rather than pendulous inflorescences. Another distinct form, sometimes referred to as "subvar. *immaculata*" (Seidenfaden 1988, p. 245), has pure white flowers



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on nearly erect spikes. Both of these forms deserve further analysis and DNA studies may prove them to be two species.

In Java, the most brightly colored form of *Aer. odorata* occurs with slightly larger plants with narrower leaves and larger flowers spaced more distantly on the longer inflorescences. This plant is identified in early literature as *Aerides virens* (Veitch 1963, p. 81).

At the easternmost extent of its range in Mindoro, Philippines, *Aer. odorata* displays another unusual color form. The nearly translucent pale golden flowers have a distinct yellow contrasting lip. This form also blooms earlier in the year: late winter rather than May–June as do the typical forms.

A species of such range and diversity, *Aer. odorata* is easy to grow. The vigorous rooting habit makes the species an excellent choice for greenhouse or windowsill growers starting with their first vandaceous plant. *Aerides odorata* does best with abundant water and should be allowed to become just barely dry between waterings, yet in much of its natural habitat it can withstand prolonged drought. Similarly, the species needs warm temperatures: 80–90 F (26–33 C) days and 60–70 F (15–21 C) nights. However, plants attached to our mango and avocado trees have withstood temperatures approaching freezing. Such a sweet-natured (and sweet-smelling) species should be in every collection.

References

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



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- [3] *Aerides odorata* 'April's Pink', JC/AOS, like other tetraploid strains from northern Thailand, has gracefully arching sprays of pink flowers. Grower: Keith Davis.
- [4] Pure white clones appear in *Aer. odorata* populations throughout its range. *Aerides odorata* 'Interlaken', JC/AOS, is one. Grower: Ed Gilliland.
- [5] Strains of *Aer. odorata* from northeast Thailand have erect spikes of pure white flowers, such as this clone, 'Dream City', HCC/AOS. Grower: Roy Fukumura.
- [6] *Aerides odorata* 'Lovely Surprise', AM/AOS, and others from the Philippines have flowers with attractive translucent yellow lips. Grower: Ed and Lydia Merkle.



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