

# Orchid of the Month for August, 2014

## *Gastrochilus japonicus*

by Bruce Adams



I have a three-step policy when it comes to increasing my collection. First, my goal is to keep the plant alive. Second, I want to be able to grow it well. Third, I want to be able to bloom it, or rebloom it if I received it in bud or bloom. Then I will buy more species or hybrids of that particular genus, knowing that I have a better chance of success. This works especially well with genera that have only a few species, or with genera in which the care is very similar from species to species. It does not work well with large genera like *Dendrobium*, which contains many different sections, each with their own specific needs.

*Gastrochilus* turns out to be a relatively small genus with thirty-two species, according to Jay Phal's Internet Orchid Species Encyclopedia. (1) Other sources may list more or less. What's nice about *Gastrochilus* is that many of its species can grow under a range of conditions. So, generally, if you can grow one *Gastrochilus*, you can grow (almost) them all. Some prefer cooler temperatures, such as *Gastrochilus pseudodistichus*, *Gastrochilus rantabunensis*, and *Gastrochilus raraensis*. But most are quite happy with a range of temperatures from cool to

warm. These include *Gastrochilus bellinus*, *Gastrochilus calceolaris*, *Gastrochilus dasypogon*, and *Gastrochilus japonicus*, which seem to be the species that you will most likely encounter for sale. (2) In my opinion, the more readily available species are also the more pleasing, with larger, more colorful flowers.

So let's talk a bit about my "three step policy". How many of us have fallen in love with an orchid species or hybrid, and purchased it, only to watch the plant slowly succumb to our inappropriate conditions? (I'm raising my hand at this very minute.) Let me start with my unsuccessful attempt to grow *Cyrtochilum macranthum* in Sacramento. I received healthy plants from both Ecuagenera and Golden Gate Orchids. While the locally grown plant from Golden Gate Orchids survived longer, it was totally unhappy in our hot, dry summer. So this plant never made it past step one. I couldn't grow it at all.

Next are my two specimens of *Catasetum*. I have successfully grown these for several years, so that each summer I produce large, chunky pseudobulbs with healthy leaves. Yet to date, I have never bloomed a single one of them. I'm certain that there is something wrong with my culture, but haven't figured it out yet. So I have refrained from purchasing any more *Catasetum* tribe plants until I can bloom the ones that I have.

My *Gastrochilus japonicus* arrived in bloom. This was a very nice surprise, and certainly showed me that the plant was blooming size. But could I rebloom it? As always, before I buy a new species I research its culture, even if it is something I have trepidations about being able to grow (as seen with my *Cyrtochilum* fiasco). As it turns out, *Gastrochilus* culture is actually quite simple. Jay Phal suggests growing them in "moderate shade and high humidity" and placing on a wood mount or slat basket, reducing water and fertilizer a bit after blooming. My *Gastrochilus japonicus* came from Orchids by Hausermann in a plastic net pot, which acts somewhat like a slat basket. I believe that this situation mimics mounting in that the plant dries out quickly, yet keeps the roots protected from the lower humidity, which can occur when a plant is grown outside for summer and on the windowsill in winter.

As usual, I fed with reverse osmosis water mixed with Michigan fertilizer. The plant put out new roots and leaves which were at least as big as the previous ones, a good sign. So the plant survived, and grew well. This summer I noticed a spike, and last week I had the pleasure of seeing it bloom! My first rebloom signified that I had reached step three; I'd rebloomed under my conditions. This means that I can now purchase and try to grow additional plants of other species of *Gastrochilus*. I have just ordered a *Gastrochilus calceolaris*, and have a *Gastrochilus bellinus* as well.



Being a miniature plant, rarely bigger than five or six inches tall, you can grow quite a lot of *Gastrochilus* in a very small place. That's really nice, considering that my greenhouse is only four by six feet, for a veritable cavernous twenty-four square feet. I do make use of all my wall space, but with my limited growing area, the smaller the plants, the better. And the bigger the flower size to plant size ratio, the better as well. The flowers of the more commonly grown *Gastrochilus* are all between 1.5 and 3 centimeters in size, quite respectable for such little plants. The plant pictured above is growing in a two-inch pot, has a leaf span of about four inches, and a height of two inches or so. The flowers are, in my opinion, beautiful, and not too small to see without a magnifying glass. (I'll admit that it helps to be somewhat nearsighted, as I am, but hey, I should get some benefit of a lifetime of wearing glasses!) I love the little pouch that the lip forms. In fact, the name *Gastrochilus* refers to the belly-like (*Gastro-*) hypochile (*-chilus*) of the flowers. Interestingly, *Gastrochilus* used to be included in *Saccolabium*, which sort of means the same thing! In this case it's the pouch shaped (*Sacco-*) lip (*-labium*).

It requires a bit of self-control to only grow the plants that you can grow well. I'm still fighting the 'gotta have it' syndrome many of us orchid growers suffer from. It does require a commitment to time, as you really can't judge success until you've had the plant in your conditions for a full year. But with limited growing space that many of us have, the three-step policy is, in my opinion, the best way to have a healthy, blooming collection.

Footnotes:

- 1) <http://www.orchidspecies.com/indexfghijkl.htm>
- 2) <http://www.orchidspecies.com/indexfghijkl.htm>

Sources:

- 1) Orchids by Hausermann: <http://www.orchidsbyhausermann.com/>
- 2) Oak Hill Gardens: <http://www.oakhillgardens.com/>
- 3) Marni Turkel: <http://marniturkel.com/mostlyspecies.html>

*About the author: Bruce Adams has been growing orchids for 38 years, since he got his first Orchid, *Oncidium retermeyerianum* (now *Lophiaris lindenii*!) from Orchids by Hausermann. His plants split their time between the great outdoors and a cool greenhouse in the winter, as well as on the windowsill. He is also the author of the novel, The Palace of Dreams. His ideal life would consist of writing and growing orchids, while living in Hawaii with his lovely wife, Linda.*

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