

## **Bletilla striata orchid culture- in the Riverina region of NSW**

### *-the Chinese Ground Orchid*

The genus *Bletilla* comprises about 10 species of terrestrial orchid that are native to China, Japan and Taiwan.

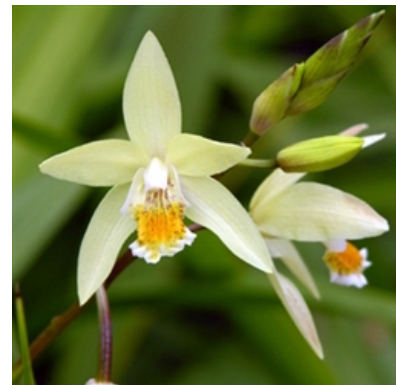
*Bletilla striata* is the most commonly grown species and is regarded as one of the easiest orchids to grow. It is also known as the hyacinth orchid and the urn orchid. It will grow in the ground in gardens in warm or cool frost-free climates or in a pot. It produces pseudobulbs that are located just below the surface.



It grows to about 50 cm height (2) with a cluster of 3-4 bright green pleated leaves. It produces a group of up to 12 pale pink to dark pink/purple flowers per raceme in spring (2). It has corm-like pseudobulbs and tends to flower best when crowded in the pot.

A less common white flowered variety is available *B. striata*, *var alba*. The variety 'First kiss' has white flowers with a purple lip. The variety 'Albostriata' has white edged leaves and purple flowers.

A rare species *Bletilla ochracea* from China with yellow sepals is becoming more available in Australia as well as a new hybrid *Bletilla* Penway Dragon (*B. formosa* x *szteschuaunica*). The yellow flowering *B. ochracea* flowers sequentially towards the end of the growing season in mid to late summer unlike *B. striata* that flowers as new growth emerges. Flowers open during the day and partly close in the evening.



*Bletilla ochracea*

More recently developed cultivars available in the United States are Kuchibeni, which has two-tone flowers, and Gotemba, which has striped foliage.

*Bletilla striata* is deciduous with leaves dying off in early autumn and reshooting in late winter. Leaves may not die off completely in autumn if conditions are warm (3).

### **Temperature requirements**

Plants will tolerate the typical temperatures experienced in the Riverina (-2 to 44°C) providing they are given protection from frosts in winter. Ideally they should be grown in a shade-house or protected verandah position where they are protected from frosts and direct summer sun. They are reported to tolerate temperatures as low as -20°C provided they are protected by mulch (4).

### **Light**

They need to receive sunlight for most of the day if they are to flower well and do best in semi shade avoiding the hot afternoon sun. Growing under a 40% shade cloth in the Riverina over summer is considered optimum.

## Humidity and air movement

Maintaining high humidity is not as important with *Bletilla striata* as other orchid species and misting sprays are generally not required except on extremely hot days with temperatures greater than 42°C.

## Water

The plants require regular watering during the growing period. Once the leaves have died down in autumn they should not be watered for the next 4-6 weeks and allowed to rest dry to avoid rotting the bulbs (4). When the new leaves have appeared in late winter watering can be resumed but only sparingly for the first few weeks as roots do not develop until about 4 weeks after the shoots appear.

## Potting medium

The plants should be repotted in early autumn soon after the leaves have died back at the end of May (2). Do not delay repotting as the pseudobulbs shoot below the surface in early winter and the new shoots are easily broken during repotting. They do not like being disturbed and may not flower well for the first year after repotting (2). They should only be repotted after they have filled the pot or the potting mix needs replacing (2).

A well draining humus rich potting mix containing loam and leaf mulch and some fertilizer should be used that should last for 3 to 4 years to avoid the need for repotting. A normal shape 250 mm diameter nursery pot is best. The bulbs should be placed about 5 to 10 cm below the surface of the potting mix. Avoid breaking roots when repotting.

## Fertilizers

The plants require frequent fertilizing every 2 to 3 weeks during their active growing period. A high N fertilizer is recommended in spring and early summer but switch to a high phosphorus and potassium fertilizer in late summer and early autumn. Stop fertilizing in late autumn (3).

## Pests and diseases

Mealy bug can be difficult to control as it can hide below the ground surface in the pseudobulbs. It is particularly active as the leaves die off in autumn. In this case it may be necessary to remove all the old dead tissue when the plants have died back and soak the bulbs in insecticide.

New shoots in early June



Clean and sterilize the pot as Mealy Bug can adhere to the rim and sides of the pot before refilling with new potting mix.

### **Varieties**

A detailed description of the different varieties their origin and culture is given in the article in Botany Boy (5) listed below.

### **Further reading and acknowledgments**

This guide is based on information provided by local growers and the references listed below.

1. Gardening Australia Flora's Orchids. ABC Books (2005).
2. Bletilla striata by Rex Johnson. The Orchid Societies Council of Victoria.  
<http://www.oscov.asn.au/articles3/belstrial.htm>
3. Bletilla striata orchids. Carter and Holmes Orchids.  
<http://www.carterandholmes.com/bletillacare.html>
4. Bletilla. Phytasia. <http://www.phytasia.com/en/cultivation-how-to-grow-hardy-orchids.php?genre=1&PHPSESSID=57fe966bc7833867780178605b94d03e>
5. Botany Boy Plant Encyclopedia. <http://botanyboy.org/the-only-easy-to-grow-terrestrial-orchid-bletilla-striata/>



Updated 20/09/15

These notes are intended as a guide only and are composed from available information and local experience. The Wagga Wagga Orchid Society and its members are not responsible for any loss or damage to plants that may occur.