

Brassia Orchid Growing in the Riverina region of NSW

-Spider orchids

There are about 35 species in the genus *Brassia* that are native to Central and South America, the West Indies, down to Venezuela and Peru (1, 2, 3, 4). Most are epiphytic and grow in wet forests from sea level to 1500m (3).

Inflorescences come from the base of the pseudobulb and can carry up to 12 blooms that can be up to 30cm across (2). The flowers can be very fragrant and have extremely long and narrow petals and sepals (4, 5) that mimic a spider. The flowers are designed to attract female parasitic wasps that pollinate the flower while laying their eggs (5, 7). Flower time is early summer and flowers can last for up to 5 weeks (5).



Temperature requirements

Brassia are cool growing and the ideal daytime temperature is 18-24°C and night temperature of 12-18°C (5, 7). They will tolerate higher temperatures if kept moist at all times and the humidity is higher. Keep plants drier if temperatures are lower than optimum. They do not tolerate frosts. In the Riverina region growing them in a heated glasshouse will give the best results but they can be grown in a protected shade house if kept warmer in winter.

Light

They require bright but diffused light about 2000 fc similar or a little less than Cattleyas, but avoid the midday sun (3). In their natural environment they get the early morning and late afternoon sun but are shaded by the tree foliage from the midday sun (5). In the Riverina region this would be provided by 50-70% shade cloth. Leaves will be a yellowish-green colour when they are receiving the correct amount of light (5). If the leaves are pale yellow they are receiving too much light and if dark green they are not receiving sufficient light (5).

Humidity and air movement

They prefer a humid environment with 50-70% humidity (5) with good air movement (7). In warm weather a daily misting is desirable (7). Damp down the greenhouse floor or use misters to increase humidity in summer (5). Protect against hot dry wind. They like good air movement particularly as humidity increases. Where necessary this can be provided by roof vents or a fan.

Water

Plants like to have their roots almost dry before each watering (4) but be watered through out the year (5). They should be kept drier in the cooler months (5). Water in the morning so leaves are dry by evening (5). If grown in a shade house in the Riverina they need a solid roof to protect them from frosts and to keep them drier in winter.



Brassia are very susceptible to root rot so must have good drainage (5).

Potting medium

As they like their roots to dry and be well drained mounting on a slab or growing them in a basket with coarse bark and charcoal suits them best (4, 5). Repot after flowering has finished about every 2 years or when the mix decomposes (5). Roots will rot if the compost is not free draining and well aerated.



Fertilizers

They require frequent application of quarter to half strength fertilizer during their growing season (6) but not during winter. Root tips can die and roots turn brown if the fertilizer is too concentrated or excess salts are allowed to accumulate (1, 5). Flush pots periodically to remove excess salts (5).

A teaspoon of gypsum and half a teaspoon of dolomite sprinkled on the top of the pot will add calcium, magnesium and counter excess acidity.

Diseases

Brassia are susceptible to bacterial and fungal leaf diseases. Monthly application of Mancozeb in the warmer months will help control these problems. Also avoid watering in the late afternoon when leaves may stay wet during the evening. If possible water the pot not the leaves. Ensuring good air movement reduces the risk of leaf diseases.

Intergeneric hybrids

Brassia have been crossed with many other genera to form about 70 hybrids (4). These include

- Aliceara (Alcra) = Brassia x Miltonia x Oncidium
- Bakerara (Bak) = Brassia x Miltonia x Oncidium x Odontoglossum
- Goodaleara (Gdlra) = Brassia x Cochlioda x Miltonia x Oncidium x Odontoglossum
- Brassidium (Brsdm) = Brassia x Oncidium
- Miltassia = Brassia x Miltonia
- Degarmoara = Brassia x Miltonia x Odontoglossum

Further reading and acknowledgements

The information in this guide is based on the publications below and local experience.

1. Growing Orchids in Cool Climate Australia. By M Fraser, J Wright and W Ferris. Second edition.
2. Gardening Australia Flora's Orchids. ABC Books (2005).
3. What orchid is that? Edited by A Pridgeon. (1992). Weldon Publishing.
4. Orchids, A Practical Handbook by B and W Rittershausen. (2001). Anness Publishing.
5. Brassia orchid care. Orchids made easy. <http://www.orchidsmadeeasy.com/brassia-orchid-care/>
6. Brassia orchid care. Online Orchid Centre. <http://onlineorchidcenter.com/brassia-orchid-care.html>
7. Orchids Plus More. <http://www.orchids-plus-more.com/brassia-orchid-plant.html>

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