

## Sarcochilus orchid growing in the Riverina region of NSW

Sarcochilus (pronounced Sar-co-kyle-us) orchids are native to Australia and New Caledonia with 19 species native to Australia and only one species is found overseas. The species is known for its compact growth habit and glistening flowers. Most species are found in humid gullies and rainforests.



The most widely grown species (*Sarcochilus hartmannii*, *S. fitzgeraldii* and *S. ceciliae*) grow on rocks in New South Wales or Queensland (4).

However all three of these species grow readily in pots in shade houses. Another species (*S. falcatus*) is found growing mostly on tree trunks, and is best grown on mounts, such as pieces of tree branch (4).

Many hybrids have been made in recent years using the above four species, and also some of the other *Sarcochilus* species that are less amenable to cultivation. In many instances these hybrids show hybrid vigour and are even easier to grow than their parent species.

### Temperature requirements

They prefer a cool, humid, shady location and will tolerate minimum temperatures as low as 4-6°C in winter and some even lower temperatures. Protect from frost and avoid excessive heat. Temperatures should not exceed 34°C but they will tolerate temperatures as high as 40°C for short periods provided they are located low in the shadehouse with very low light. Locating them under the bench in summer will help protect them from heat. They can be grown indoors near an eastern or southern facing window, in a shade-house or glasshouse, providing light, temperature and humidity requirements are met.

### Light

*Sarcochilus* orchids enjoy breezy, low light (1000-1500fc) or 70%-80% or more shade (3), humid conditions and do best lower down in a shade house or fernery than other orchids and grow well under the bench with little direct sun during the warmer months. They can be located in a brighter part of the shade-house (1500-3000fc) or on a higher bench during the cooler months. The lithophytic species are more tolerant of brighter light and drier conditions. Attention should be paid to their natural origin in terms of their requirements.

For example, *Sarco. hirticalcar* grows only in moist rainforest in heavy shade. *Sarco. fitzgerald* grows in dense shade in ravines in central NSW and southern Queensland while *Sarco ceciliae* grows on rocks in full sun.

It is suggested that flowering is improved if light levels are increased when flower spikes first appear.



### Humidity and air movement

They prefer a humid environment up to 80-90% with good air movement (5). Humidity can be raised by using misters, keeping the shade-house floor moist or standing the pot on a gravel filled tray containing water, but the pot must not sit in the water. Houses cooled with evaporative coolers will have high humidity whereas air conditioning can dry the air. Similarly in winter, some room heaters may lower humidity and plants will need to be placed where adequate humidity can be maintained.



*Sarcochilus falcatus* 'Jacki'  
AM/OSCOV

### Water

These orchids require plenty of water when in active growth but during winter, when they cease growth, watering once each week is ample (4). *S. ceciliae* prefers being grown slightly drier than other Sarcs (3).

### Potting medium

Sarcochilus are best repotted during their most active growing season, which commences in March and continues into early winter, when the plants rest until they flower, mostly in mid- to late spring. Avoid repotting in very hot or cold weather (3). An application of Seasol following repotting is said to be beneficial (3).

*Sarcochilus ceciliae* and some of its hybrids flower a little later, usually during summer. Most sarcochilus species and their hybrids are best potted in a mixture of 80% pine bark pieces (5-10 mm diameter) and 20% river pebbles or scoria of similar size (3). Approximately two parts of bark to one of pebbles gives good results. They can also be grown in a 1:1 mix of bark and perlite.

Well-drained plastic 'squat' pots are ideal (3). *Sarcochilus ceciliae* (and to a lesser extent its hybrids) should be placed high in its pot, it seems to do best if its roots are allowed to wander over the surface of the mix rather than penetrating into the mix (4).

### Fertilizers

Regular applications of liquid fertilisers year round (3) at no more than quarter to half the concentration recommended by the manufacturer stimulate growth during summer and autumn. Some groups recommend no fertilizer application in winter in cooler climates (4). As natives they are sensitive to high levels of fertilizers (3). A dusting of blood and bone and dolomite is suggested at regular intervals (3).

### Flowering

Care should be taken not to wet the flowers when watering, especially in dull, still weather. Sarcochilus flowers tend to spot very readily due to the growth of Botrytis (Grey Mould), which is most prevalent in



damp conditions.

### Hybrids

As with many orchids, hybrids are typically easier to grow than species.



**Acknowledgements and further reading;** These cultural notes have been adapted from notes kindly provided by the North-East Melbourne Orchid Society and other references listed below.

1. Growing Orchids in Cool Climate Australia (2nd edn) by M J Fraser, J Wright, W Ferris (2013).
2. Gardening Australia Flora's Orchids. ABC Books (2005).
3. Sarcochilus by Neville Roper.  
<http://www.orchidsocietynsw.com.au/SarcochilusGrowingHints.htm>
4. How to grow sarcochilus. Orchid Societies Council of Victoria.  
<http://www.oscov.asn.au/articles2/cultsarc.htm>
5. Sarcochilus. [http://www.sdorchids.com/articles/sarco\\_article.htm](http://www.sdorchids.com/articles/sarco_article.htm)

*Your comments and suggestions on cultural guide are welcome. Email your comments to dearconsultingservices@gmail.com*

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