

Brassavola – The Fragrant Lady of the Night

Green Culture Singapore Feature Article for July 2007

Published online 5 August 2007

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Above: *Brassavola nodosa* flowers display themselves elegantly.

Forget perfumes and essential oils. The strong, sweet fragrance *Brassavola* emits in the night with a hint of citrus will guarantee its grower an instant relaxation therapy. A 'must have' in every apartment, the attractive scent of *Brassavola* species will definitely reward you with spikes of dainty looking white flowers that 'dance' in the wind.

The flowers of *Brassavola* are not only fragrant and elegant looking but also possess an unique shape comprising of a curled, heart shaped lip and long, slender petals forming an attractive looking flower. Adding a pleasantly sweet scent to the night breeze, the scent *Brassavola* gives out can be detected a few metres away. In the wild, the exquisite smell emitted is used to attract night pollinators for their reproduction. Each stem will produce one erect inflorescence consisting of 1 to 6 flowers. The flowers are long lasting and can last around a month or so on a well-established plant.

Brassavola comes from the botanical family *Orchidaceae* and is a genus of 20 orchid species. Most of their flowers are white with a greenish or yellowish tinge, creating a simple, pure look unlike other orchid hybrids that look like paint splashed on canvass. These tropical growing species originate from the lowlands of Central and South America, thus most of them grow well in the warm tropical climate here in Singapore. These orchids are epiphytes, and can be found growing with their roots attached to trees.



Above: A hybrid - *Brassavola* 'Singapura'.

Part of the Cattleya alliance in the orchid family, *Brassavola* species are distinctly different from its relatives. It is unique as each growth contains a single succulent needle-like leaf that grows on an elongated pseudobulb, creating an overall appearance of a spiky bush with elegant flowers extending out from each growth. *Brassavola* species are sympodia orchids that grow new shoots beside existing growths of mature plants, and hence can be easily propagated through division. Most common species have leaves up to 20 – 30cm in length, though rarer species can have leaves that grow up till 90cm.

Cultivation Tips

Light and temperature: Similar to the other genera in the cattleya alliance, *Brassavola* species require a fair bit of light to reward its grower with constant blooms. Due to the small surface area of the tough succulent leaf, *Brassavola* can stand full sun without any problems. Otherwise, partial sun should suffice for growers who do not have access to full sun. Morning or evening sun will do best for these plants. Temperature is not a problem for these tough plants as they are warm growing plants.



Above: *Brassavola nodosa* mounted on a piece of wood.

Water: *Brassavola* species have a water storage organ called pseudobulb at the base of each leaf which allows it to withstand a few days of drought without any problems. However to maintain a constantly blooming and healthy plant, its best to water them once every 1 to 2 days if exposed to partial sun. If full sun is given, more frequent watering is required. However, it is essential to ensure that the roots of the plant dry out completely before watering again. As these plants grow attached to trees in the wild, they dislike having waterlogged roots.

Fertiliser: The same rule applies to *Brassavola* as for most other orchids: Fertilise 'Weekly weakly' Orchids like to be fertilised often in very weak dosages, usually one-eighth the recommended dosage once or twice a week. Use a well balanced liquid fertiliser easily purchased from nurseries. Avoid fertilisers with hormones added unless the plant refuses to bloom.

Potting and Media: *Brassavola* species require a well aerated media for their roots to grow freely in. Orchid growers usually pot them or mount them.

Potting: Use a plastic netted pot with holes at the side or clay pots for optimal aeration. For the media, use medium sized horticultural grade charcoal to pot the plant. Do not bury all the roots under the media as their roots prefer to be exposed to air.

Mounting: Prepare a clean piece of fern bark or wooden slab and some twist tie. Wet a small amount of dried sphagnum moss and press it on the slab. Place the plant on the slab and tie it with a twist tie. Allow the roots to develop and attach to the slab before placing in full sun.

Propagation: *Brassavola* species are easily propagated through divisions and a large clump can easily be divided by cutting the short connecting rhizome with a sterile blade. Gently separate the two divisions of the plant and pot/mount them up separately as mentioned above. To initiate rooting, a small amount of sphagnum moss can be placed at the base of the roots. A division as small as 2-3 growths can be grown into a compact new clump once the plant has been established.



Above: *Brassavola* 'Singapura' on a table.



Above: *Brassolaelia* 'Morning Glory' (*B. nodosa* x *L. purpurata*) in bloom. Notice the narrow cylindrical lip inherited from the *Brassavola* parent.

Placing the plant: *Brassavola* species are usually compact and relatively small as compared to other larger orchids. Thus they make good houseplants as they do not occupy too much space in apartments. Place the plant at the windowsill with good light, preferably with morning and evening sun. A blooming specimen can also be temporarily placed in the hall to enjoy the intoxicating fragrance at night.

Concluding Remarks

With the ease of growing *Brassavola* species, these plants make easy orchids for beginners. With good care, they will definitely reward you with frequent blooms that will brighten your day. There are also many hybrids available commercially from the market that come in different colours. *Brassavola* species make good crosses with other species and hybrids from the cattleya alliance resulting in striking yellow and red flowers with a distinctive round lip of the *Brassavola*. With so many hybrids to choose from, growers are spoiled for choice to select those with beautiful lip and colour.

Acknowledgements

Green Culture Singapore would like to thank Xuan Hong for writing this feature article and sharing with fellow gardening enthusiasts.

Xuan Hong would also like to thank Ong Chong Ren for allowing him to use his pictures on this article.

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