

CYPRIPEDIUM MACRANTHUM var. VENTRICOSUM

EARLY LAST Spring I potted up a fine, sturdy-looking root of this orchid, with all the care deserved to such a rarity. My efforts were well rewarded by the result and just in case this handsome Oriental decides to leave the confines of my tiny garden-frame so that it may return, in spirit if not in body, to the more spacious slopes of Nippon, I feel that a brief note on this plant, which has not been seen in Britain for about half a century, to my knowledge, would not be out of place.

The nomenclature of the *Cypripedium macranthum* (or *macranthon*—one name seems as good as the other) group has always been in a highly confused state. The plant which I have in my possession at the moment is, however, almost certainly that which is most graphically described and illustrated in Farrer's "My Rock-Garden" as *C. macranthum* var. *ventricosum* and is probably the one which is to be found elsewhere under the name *C. ventricosum*. Whatever it may be called, it is without doubt one of the finest of hardy, terrestrial orchids. In fact, I have little hesitation, for once, in siding with 'that great Cham' of rock-gardening (if I may misquote Smollett's often misunderstood reference to Dr. Johnson), Reginald Farrer, when he writes that 'far away above *C. reginae* stands *C. ventricosum*.'

Very soon after I had potted my precious plant in a friendly mixture of heavy loam, sand, gravel and leaf-soil, I was delighted by the prompt appearance of a plump and promising, pale green shoot, from which the plaited, downy leaves of fresh and delicate green cord-velvet quickly unfolded themselves. Then, one day, I noticed, away down among these leaves, a firm, green bud securely ensconced. Was it going to turn brown and shrivel, like the buds on my plant of *C. japonicum*, or would it develop into a perfect and glorious flower? Day by day the tiny knob began to swell until, quite suddenly, I was confronted with, not a poor, aborted bud, but a large bloom of one of the finest orchids which I have seen.

Cypripedium macranthum ventricosum has the largest flowers of any of the hardy *Cypripediums* in cultivation and probably of any hardy species whatsoever, with the exception of *C. tibeticum*, a wonder-lurid-flowered dwarf from the bleak Tibetan moorlands which I hopelessly long to have. The bloom on my specimen was well over four inches across and the lip was two and a half inches long. This fine size is coupled with a number of other desirable attributes, not the least of which is exquisite colouring. The petals, sepals and lip are all of a similar, rich and dusky shade of subtle rose-pink, imperceptibly dappled and intricately veined with a deeper tone of crimson. Over and above this, to quote from the masterly pen of Farrer, 'the petals of *ventricosum* are long and undulating . . . and give a solid brilliance of grace to the flower; while the dorsal, instead of being squatty, is tall and waved and pointed, with a swollen pouch of the right proportion and design, rather obese than starved.' The total height of my plant was but ten inches and the complete impression

was one of infinitely graceful, artistic proportion. The whole plant has a fascinating, almost sinister, beauty about it and, when compared to it, *C. reginae* looks like a rosy-cheeked, comely, buxom wench from the Allegheny Mountains alongside the subtly sinister and sophisticated beauty of a Japanese Lucrezia Borgia, Midlothian.

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DIANTHUS NEGLECTUS

It is a well known maxim that one should exercise caution in buying dianthus plants, particularly of species, because of the great variation to be found from good to 'decidedly not so good' forms. To none does this apply more than in the case of *Dianthus neglectus* (fig. 25) which at its best can be one of the finest of all rock garden plants and at its worst one of the most disappointing—straggling in growth and with thin-petalled, washed-out flowers.

A native of the mountains of Switzerland and S.W. Europe, it grows from a strong central main root in a dense mat of fine, narrow, linear leaves which are almost indistinguishable from those of the fine grasses among which it is found growing. The flowers are usually solitary on short, erect stems of from two to five inches, but are produced in great profusion and in colour range from pink to rich crimson, but all showing that characteristic buff reverse; they are rather more than one inch across.

It is usually accepted as a general rule that all or nearly all dianthi are lime-lovers, but *Dianthus neglectus* is an exception in preferring a lime-free soil.

OMPHALODES CAPPADOCICA

AN OLD and long grown favourite of the rock garden which still holds its place in face of the keen competition of many more recent introductions is *Omphalodes cappadocica*, or *O. cornifolia* as it used to be known (see fig. 26).

This lovely blue-flowered plant of the family *Boraginaceae* can cover quite a patch of ground by means of its creeping, underground rhizomes, and seems to do almost equally well in either full sun or partial shade—a dry rock wall, or on the north side of a rock. Its basal leaves, grouped in tufts, are ovate and about three to three and a half inches long, cordate at the base. The upper leaves on the erect or ascending six- to eight-inch stems are progressively much smaller.

The gentian-blue flowers, each about one third of an inch across, are arranged in loose graceful racemes, and have quite a long season lasting from spring well into summer. Even when the flowers are over there is something attractive in the shade of green and the shape of the leaves themselves that makes *Omphalodes cappadocica* a pleasing companion to its neighbours in the rock garden.