

COMPARETTIA

There are reputed to be upwards of a dozen species in this genus of miniature epiphytes, but only 4 are well-known in the hobby. Related to the *Oncidiums*, they are small plants with relatively small pseudobulbs and proportionately large leathery leaves which produce arching sprays of showy flowers in jewel-like colors.

The flowers are most notable for their large lip, but they are also interesting for the spur-like structure formed by portions of the lateral sepals and the lip. Hummingbirds are often illustrated feeding from this spur.

Comp. falcata is the most widespread species in this Neotropic genus, ranging from Brazil and Bolivia to the West Indies. It is hardly surprising that it is also the easiest to grow, and as fate would have it the least showy, with smallish rose-purple flowers. *Comp. coccinea*, a Brazilian species, has slightly larger flowers red-orange in color.

Comp. macroplectron and *Comp. speciosa* from Colombia and Ecuador, have larger, flashier flowers of rose-pink and intense orange respectively. Mature plants of these last two can give a spectacular display in full bloom. Predictably enough, they are also somewhat more difficult to grow well.

All seem to respond to mounting on a bit of tree branch, where their rambling roots can romp with abandon. I have had less success with tree-fern or cork mounts. Indoor growers might try plastic mesh pots. Most authorities recommend a shady spot with high humidity. In contrast I have had best success growing them in relatively bright light with daily watering or heavy misting and plenty of air movement. Unfortunately, none of the species seems particularly long-lived in cultivation, seeming to lose vigor after 3 - 5 years. Perhaps we simply grow them too warm.

The hybridists have been busy in recent years, adding *Comparettia*'s showy lip and well-proportioned spike of flowers to related genera. The first attempt seems to have been made as recently as 1958, with the first of several crosses to *Rodriguezia*. Since then many hybrids have been made with *Oncidium* and *Odontoglossum*. Most which I have seen are well worth adding to any collection.

The species themselves are more than worth the few square inches of space they'll take up in any collection.

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