

# Coelogyne - for you, for me

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Photographs: Linet Hamman and Sieg Hamman

The coelogyne are surely one of the most attractive and variable genera in the orchid family.

**S**ome have trusses of lacy, snow-white fragrant blooms (*cristata*); sinister salmon pink solitary flowers (*speciosa*); chain-like racemes in shades of topaz and chocolate brown (*tomentosa*); erect, delicate white, spicy scented white (*nitida*) and even spectacular emerald green flowers marked with blue-black ridges (*pandurata*).

*Coelogyne* is a large genus of more than two hundred species distributed from the Himalayas and southern China in the North, to Ceylon and throughout Malaysia to the Pacific Islands. The name derives from the Greek *koilos* (hollow) and *gyne* (woman), referring to the deep stigmatic cavity.

When I saw the name for the first time, I found it very difficult to read, don't even mention pronouncing it! For a while I always referred to 'that beautiful white orchid with the difficult name.' To complicate matters even further the different regions seem to have different ways of pronouncing it. (According to Hawkes (1965) the correct pronunciation starts with an "s".)

The great bonus is that one of the most rewarding and beautiful species of the genus, *Coelogyne cristata*, is also common and easy to obtain. It can be grown into a large specimen plant with ease and is

more beautiful than any flower bouquet. Some of you might remember the exquisite specimen *Coel.cristata* at the National Show in Bellville, 1994.

The genus *Coelogyne* was founded by John Lindley in 1821 in his *Collectanea Botanica*.

E. Pfitzer and F. Kranzlin revised the genus in *Das Pflanzenreich* (1907). They divided the 103 species in the genus into two series: *Succedaneae* (where the flowers open in succession in the inflorescence) and *Simultanaceae* (the flowers open simultaneously). When a further more than 140 species were discovered the classification was in dire need for revision. Recently F. Butzin published a key and divided the genus into five subgenera – *Coelogyne* (14 sections), *Chelonistele*, *Hologyne*, *Ptychogyne* and *Cyathogyne*.

There are several features to study that can aid in identifying the different species apart from flower colour and lip ornamentation. Two important characteristics are the presence or absence of basal sheathing bracts and whether the flowers open simultaneously or one at a time.

The development of the inflorescence is also a very important characteristic and classification tool.



The pure white form of *Coelogyne cristata*, *Coelogyne cristata* var. *hololeuca*, is pretty and easy to grow and flower. It is a very rewarding plant and easy to grow into a specimen.



*Coelogyne cristata* grows in Eastern Himalayas – it is commonly seen in cultivation.



A close-up of *Coelogyne cristata* var. *hololeuca*.

It may be:

1. *hysteranthous* - after the pseudobulbs have finished growing
2. *syanthous* - simultaneous with the growth of the pseudobulbs
3. *proteranthous* before the pseudobulb with the leaves develops or
4. *heteranthous* - the inflorescence is borne on a separate shoot which produces only rudimentary pseudobulbs and leaves

There have been some very successful *Coelogyne* crosses. The first hybridising with *Coelogyne* was made almost one hundred years ago in 1906 by Brymer – *Coelogyne* Brymeriana that is *Coel. asperata* x *Coel. pulverula*.

Over the years there have been more than thirty-two crosses and *Coelogyne cristata* was most used as a parent. To me one of the most spectacular crosses is the green-flowered *Coelogyne Burfordiense* (*pandurata* x *asperata*). *Coelogyne* Intermedia (according to some records originally a natural hybrid between *C. cristata* and *C. tomentosa*) and *Coelogyne* Unchained Melody (*cristata* x *flaccida*) are also worth mentioning.

Because of the great variety of habitat and altitudinal range, it is difficult to pinpoint growing conditions for the genus.

Intermediate to warm growing species include *Coelogyne asperata*, *C. mayeriana*, *C. massangeana* and *C. pandurata*. They may be watered and fertilised uniformly throughout the year.

The cool growing species, such as *Coelogyne cristata*, *C. flaccida* and *C. fimbriata*, require rest when the new growth matures and until new roots appear.

Common belief is that you should keep *Coelogyne cristata* dry for the whole winter to make it flower well. Some people keep them so dry that the pseudobulbs look like very dry prunes. What it actually needs is a drop in temperature and then it can flower beautifully with fat, swollen pseudobulbs.

The best advice is to research what the natural habitat and climate is of the region where the species occur. Some species like *Coelogyne nitida* can be grown in almost any condition because it is naturally so widespread.

Most *Coelogyne*s are easy to grow and usually do well in a hanging basket. They prefer bright light, but no direct sun that can easily burn the leaves.

So, there's no excuse, hop onto the *Coelogyne* bus and enjoy the abundance and ease of this beautiful genus. \*



*Coelogyne mooreana* cv. Brockhurst FCC/RHS - this beautiful species with its upright inflorescence is endemic to Vietnam.



*Coelogyne speciosa* has almost insignificant petals, but sports a beautiful white and dark brown lip - they flower throughout the year.



*Coelogyne fimbriata* is widespread from the Himalayas in India, Vietnam, Thailand, to southern China and Hong Kong.



A species endemic to Vietnam is the larger-flowering *Coelogyne lawrenceana*.



Many of the *Coelogyne* species produce pendulous inflorescences and therefore they grow well in baskets or mounted like *Coelogyne massangeana*.



Complementing both parents *Coelogyne Unchained Melody* is a good mixture of both *Coelogyne cristata* and *Coelogyne flaccida*. The bonus of course is the longer arching spray and many more larger flowers to enjoy.

**References:**

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**CD's:**

- The RHS Orchid Information System Version 3.0 CD
- Wildcatt Orchids (August 2003 Update)