

# Painting colonial plants

## Epiphyllum species and hybrids

Beverly Allen, the well-known Sydney botanical artist, was awarded a Gold Medal at the Royal Horticultural Society's January 2007 botanical art exhibition in London for a series of eight *Epiphyllum* species and hybrids. Beverly, who has pursued a career as a botanical artist since 1998, has shown annually at the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney *Botanica* Exhibition since 1999, *The Art of Botanical Illustration* at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne, since 2000 and exhibits regularly with the American Society of Botanical Artists in New York and Washington. Her work is held in private collections internationally as well as at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation and in The Shirley Sherwood Collection. **Colleen Morris** learns more.

**A**mong botanical artists the Gold Medal of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) is a coveted award. Beverly Allen delights in the rigour of accurate botanical representation, exact colour reproduction and attention to detail, the criteria on which works are judged.

Artists must display at least eight pieces of work, which are primarily of botanical interest and at least life-size. The Gold Medal is more usually awarded to exhibits, which focus on a particular theme or plant family and the standard across all the illustrations must be consistent and outstanding. It is Beverly's choice of plant family and the origin of some of the specimens illustrated which is of special interest to garden historians.

The 2004 post conference tour visited a number of colonial gardens in the Camden area west of Sydney. The plants growing in these old gardens drew much attention and a botanical correspondence ensued, which was edited and published in *Australian Garden History*, Vol. 16 (4) pp. 18-20 at the precise time that Beverly was researching the subject of her RHS entry. The *Epiphyllum* spp (or what we thought to be *Epiphyllum* spp) had been a knock out, laying down the gauntlet to the roses, or indeed the orchids to prove just which is the 'queen' of flowers. It is little wonder that any number of the night flowering species are referred to as Queen of the Night or *belle de nuit*, a common name that is easily recognised but adds to the general confusion we have with correct identification of the plants of this family.

Beverly Allen prefers to paint plants that aren't common subjects. An enthusiast for the delicacy and complexity of the flowers of this family of plants, Beverly made the unusual choice to paint the *Epiphyllum* of our old gardens. 'They have been neglected and I love the contrast between the beautiful silky flowers and the tough, awkwardness of

their stems' she says. For more than a year, Beverly visited gardens during the crucial and short-lived flowering period, working at a steady but furious pace to capture colour, form and detail. *Epiphyllum hookeri* (syn. *E. Hookerii*, *Cactus phyllanthus*) bursts into bloom at about 11pm and senesces at dawn allowing little time to capture the minute detail required for botanical accuracy. To quote Margot Child who was involved with the inception of the annual *Botanica* exhibition and is Beverly's co-founder of the Florilegium Society at the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney, 'the degree of difficulty is eleven out of ten'.

*Only a small number of botanical illustrators have captured the beauty of this particular species*

When she embarked on painting these species Beverly had some insight into the challenge for her technical skills as a botanical illustrator but little did she envisage the complexities of identification and botanical nomenclature. She concentrated on locating species but this in itself was a challenge as *Epiphyllum* spp. readily hybridise. Looking at old illustrations and publications on Cactaceae indicates how difficult it can be to differentiate between species and a more than rudimentary knowledge of nomenclature changes is needed to explore historical images. Correct identifications were made when Beverly exhibited her work in London. Here, she had the benefit of advice from botanists at Kew and Nigel Taylor, one of the editors of the recently published *The New Cactus Lexicon* (David Hunt, Nigel Taylor and Graham Charles, 2006). This is the most scientifically authoritative compendium on the Cactaceae published since Britton and Rose's monograph of 1919-1923, one of the references Beverly used for her research on the species and hybrids she had discovered.



ABOVE: *Epiphyllum hookeri* med., the illustration purchased by the RHS Lindley Library.

Illustration: Beverly Allen