



LEFT: *Disocactus phyllanthoides*.

Illustration: Beverly Allen

Specimens Beverly painted include plants from Ellensville near Mt Hunter and Yaralla, Concord, two important old NSW gardens. I had observed both the species in these gardens in a number of old gardens, particularly the colonial gardens of the Camden and Campbelltown area. When these gardens were first established William Macarthur's famous Camden Park Nursery was nearby. Macarthur issued four printed catalogues of plants cultivated at Camden in 1843, 1845, 1850 and 1857, after which Francis Ferguson, a former employee of the nursery and with whom he maintained a good relationship, established a nursery and issued catalogues for his Australian Nursery at Camden. A new house at Ellensville was constructed in 1890 and Francis Ferguson, an old friend of the owner, designed the new garden. In 2004 we delighted in seeing both cream and red *Epiphyllum*[sic] clambering over and through an old *Tecomaria capensis* hedge, their twisted, flattened stems an unruly tangle, from which burst their gorgeous flowers.

The red flowered specimens from Ellensville and Yaralla proved to be *Disocactus ackermannii* (syn. *Phyllocactus Ackermannii*, *Epiphyllum ackermannii*, *Nopalxochia phyllanthoides*). It was collected in Mexico by a Mr Ackermann and introduced to England in 1829. The first flowering of the plant in England caused a sensation and coincided with a rise in the popularity of Cacti as collections among a select group of wealthy plant amateurs. It is often confused as a hybrid and has so perplexed botanists (let alone amateurs) over a correct identification that a paper, *The strange and curious tale of the true and false Epiphyllum Ackermannii (Cactaceae)* was published in the scholarly journal *Taxon* (Vol 38:11, 1989, pp.124-128). *Epiphyllum ackermannii* is listed in the Catalogues of plants cultivated at Camden for 1850 and 1857. Mid-nineteenth century illustrations of this species appear decorous rather than detailed.

It is very plausible that the majority of the red flowering *Disocactus ackermannii* we see growing in the old gardens of western Sydney originated from Camden Park although it was also available from Shepherd's Darling Nursery, Sydney and Michael Guilfoyle's Exotic Nursery, Double Bay in 1851. The extraordinarily delicate *Epiphyllum hookeri* is also listed in both the Camden Park and Darling Nursery catalogues by one of its former names, *Epiphyllum phyllanthus*.

Another of Beverly's subjects, the pink flowered *Disocactus phyllanthoides* which many growers know as *Epiphyllum* 'Deutsche Kaiserin', appears as *Epiphyllum phyllanthoides* in the Camden Catalogue and *Epiphyllum speciosum* in the Darling Nursery catalogue. But Alexander Macleay can be credited with the earliest known introduction of this plant into the Elizabeth Bay House garden with his importation of *Cactus phyllanthoides* (yet

another alternative name) from Loddiges in 1836. All three species discussed above are listed as growing in the Sydney Botanic Garden in 1857, along with another five *Epiphyllum*.

The lovely cream species at Ellensville and many old gardens is *Epiphyllum crenatum* (syn. *Phyllocactus crenatus*) but it seems it has not been grown in our gardens for as many decades as we might believe. By 1895 the Sydney Botanic Gardens Catalogue had an extensive list of Cactaceae, *Phyllocactus crenatus* was among them but it is not listed in earlier nineteenth century nursery catalogues. Another species painted in the series is *Epiphyllum oxypetalum* which I suspect is the *Phyllocactus grandiflorus* listed in the same 1895 Catalogue. A salmon flowering hybrid that many older gardeners recognize as being 'grown by their grandmothers', was identified as *E. crenatum* X *Disocactus* sp.

According to William Jackson Hooker's 1826 description in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (pp. 2692-93) *Epiphyllum hookeri* had been cultivated in British gardens since 1710 but rarely flowered 'and the few figures that do exist of it give no idea of the beauty and delicacy of the blossom'. The summer of 1826 was a fine, dry one and Glasgow Botanic Garden rejoiced at three blossoms on three consecutive nights between 8pm and 3-4am, enabling Hooker to produce the illustration that accompanied the text.

Today, photographs may convey the delicacy of these flowers but so often the minute detail is lacking. It is for this reason that botanical illustration at its best will not be surpassed. Only a small number of botanical illustrators have captured the beauty of this particular species and so it is not surprising that Brent Elliott of the Lindley Library chose to add Beverly Allen's *Epiphyllum hookeri* to its collection. The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew added *E. oxypetalum* and a painting of an apricot hybrid (*Selenicereus* X *Disocactus* X *Epiphyllum*) to their collection. A generous benefactor has donated Ellensville's *E. crenatum* to the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney.

Beverly may have completed her series but as she enthusiastically discussed looking for another publication in her quest for an accurate identification, she remarked, 'it draws you in, you get hooked'. Whether the botanical nomenclature will remain unaltered, I cannot tell but hooked, I could not agree more.

In 1996 Colleen Morris was commissioned to establish the Colonial Plants database for the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, a task she undertook with botanist Tony Rodd over a period of two years. HHT has since developed the database so it is available to all researchers at [www.hht.net.au/research/cslrc](http://www.hht.net.au/research/cslrc)