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## Outrageous orchids at S.F. Expo

### LOOKING FOR RARE BEAUTIES? CHECK OUT THESE SOBREALIAS

Holly Hayes  
 Mercury News  
 Article Launched: 02/23/2008 07:57:42 AM PST

Bruce Rogers has a passion for growing plants you've probably never seen or heard of.

*Sobralias*-- the rare and exotic tallest orchids in the world -- have literally taken over his life. And it would be his fondest wish that they take over yours, too.

Rogers has been raising, hybridizing and decorating with orchids for more than 25 years, but it's the *Sobralias* (sew-BRAIL-eyah) that have captured his heart with their unusual bamboo-like foliage and outrageously showy flowers.

He will tempt you to join the cult at next weekend's Pacific Orchid Exposition. He will bring many examples of these giants, which are becoming increasingly available to mere mortals and which he says will thrive in California gardens.

Rogers, 56, took a little time this month to chat by e-mail about his obsession from his home in San Francisco.

Q: What made you fall in love with *Sobralias*, the giants of the orchid world?

A: With *Sobralias*, it was love at first sight. I had little glimpses of them from afar, illustrations from books and magazines. My first encounter with a blooming plant left me speechless with shaky knees. They are unbelievable. Years ago, I was asked to decorate a large urn as a backdrop for a statue unveiling. I used a large eight-foot *Sobralia rogersiana* in full bloom, and stood aside ready to receive praise and compliments. No one there had ever seen a *Sobralia* before. People thought I had tied

Cattleya orchid flowers onto a bamboo plant so well that the wires could not be seen. No one believed it was a real plant!

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Q: What makes these plants so great for California gardens and patios?

A: *Sobralias*, with their elegant foliage and tremendous flowers, grow very well here and can be found in older gardens and estates. The foliage is statuesque and strong, and the flowering season lasts all summer and into the fall. They can be grown both in pots and in the ground, in sun or shade, rain or shine. There are *Sobralias* for every microclimate that occurs in our area, from the warmer areas to the cooler spots. *Sobralia macrantha* seems the most adaptable with blooming plants reported from the top of the Santa Cruz mountains to the flats of Fresno, the hills of Marin to Santa Rosa and everywhere south.

Q: These may be the coolest plants that people have never heard of. What are you doing to try to change that?

A: The scarcity of *Sobralias* has kept them from the public eye. While they have been in private and civic gardens for many years, availability has always been a problem, as they are difficult to raise from seed and take from four to eight years to raise to flowering size. *Sobralias* only have a small window for dividing, which also hinders propagation.

After working with several local laboratories with little success, my good friend Terry Root and I decided to form a nursery business specializing only in *Sobralias*. Terry is a genius in the lab, a great grower and not afraid to try new

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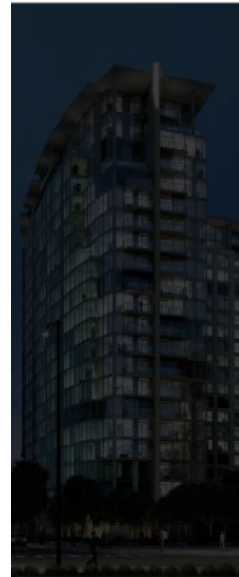
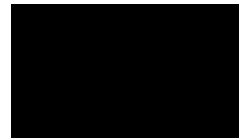
*Sobralia mirabilis*. Photo by Ron Parsons. ( Ron Parsons )

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techniques and formulas, and after much work we now have production numbers that can begin to satisfy demand.

Q: A lot of gardeners think orchids are too fussy to grow. How do you counter that assumption?

A: Once established, *Sobralias* are as tough as a jade plant or any other garden plant. They can take dirty water and dirty air. The only thing fussy about them is they can only be divided or repotted when showing both new growth and new roots. I think a lot of gardeners have never had experience with orchids in the garden, and because orchids can be relatively more expensive (than other plants), they are afraid to try them.

Q: *Sobralia* is a large and complicated genus. But in general, how tall can some varieties grow?

A: There is no other orchid genus that is so diversified in terms of size, from *Sobralia elegans*, which grows less than a foot tall to *Sobralia altissima*, which is over 40 feet tall. The most popular group, the field type with species such as *xantholuca*, *macrantha veitchii* and their hybrids grow from 2 to 6 feet tall. There are new hybrids, which grow from 2 to 4 feet, making them ideal for patios and gardens.

Q: How large do the flowers tend to be?

A: I often tell people that *Sobralia* flowers are so big, you can use them to wrap gifts, as tablecloths, or as clothing for small children. The modern *Sobralia* field types have huge *Cattleya*-looking flowers from one to 10 inches across, with some species such as *Sob. rosea* and *Sob. rogersiana* having flowers as large as dinner plates. When you read orchid reports from Victorian times, you read about even larger *Sobralia* flowers and one wonders what is now extinct in the wild.

Q: How long do they last in the garden?

A: *Sobralia* flowers and plants are divided into two groups: the ephemeral group, where the flower lasts only one day, and in some cases just a morning, and the field group, where the flower lasts from three to 10 days. With both types, the individual canes carry many flowers that are displayed singularly, so the overall display lasts for many months with a mature plant carrying multiple canes. Some ephemeral species such as *Sob. klotzschiana* carry 20-plus flowers and bloom for over a year, although the jasmine scented flowers last only a day. The longest lasting flowers in the field group are probably *Sob. undatocarinata* and *Sob. pulcherrima*, with 10-day flowers, with five to seven flowers per stem, which give you two months of heaven. We are breeding for flower longevity also, and species such as these are very intriguing building blocks.

Q: Do they have finicky tastes in regard to sun exposure, drainage and nutrients?

A: Although I have seen them grown beautifully in full sun, I prefer morning sun or filtered shady afternoon sun. Water drainage must be perfect. *Sobralias* love water and when in active growth, it is hard to over-water. They also love fresh air.

Q: Are they attractive to pests?

A: When they grown outside, pests leave these alone except when they are in flower. Snails and slugs will travel miles and lie, cheat and steal to get to the flowers. They really love them. Either use a safe product like Sluggo, or take a little copper garden tape and wrap the stem below the buds or new growth. When grown inside as a houseplant in dry conditions, one must watch for mites, but this is seldom a problem in California.

Q: Share some secrets for having success with these gorgeous plants.

A: Despite the fabulous foliage and great flowers, with *Sobralias* it's all about the roots. A strong root system is key for success. You might hear from old garden talk that they need to be pot-bound to bloom well, but that is because usually a pot-bound plant will have a good root system. They do not have to be pot-bound, they just need good roots. If growing outside, plant *Sobralias* in raised beds and pre-check your drainage.

Q: Do you have a favorite? Might it be *Sobralia rogersiana*, the one named for you?

A: *Sobralias* are like women, there are many kinds, and they are all beautiful. To pick a single one as a favorite is impossible, so here are my three favorites. *Sobralia fimbriata* is an ephemeral type with beautiful dark green pleated leaves. The 2- to 3-foot plant blooms twice a year with pastel flowers with a beautiful fimbriated (fringed) lip. The fragrance is incredible and unique. It is the only orchid flower that I will pick and carry with me through the day just for the fragrance. *Sobralia rogersiana* var. *Bolin* is my obsession. *Sobralia callosa* is my favorite miniature. Perfect little flower, perfect little plant. It is truly a jewel of nature.

Q: When were you first bitten by the orchid bug?

A: I was not bitten by the orchid bug. I was assaulted by the orchid bug many, many moons ago. I've been growing, hybridizing and decorating with orchids for over 25 years. I began my professional career in the late 1970s when the city of Atlanta Parks Department hired me to work with its orchids in the greenhouses in Piedmont Park. Returning home to the Bay Area, I was hired by the Rod McLellan Co. as the head grower for the boarding department and to hybridize *Vanda* orchids. In the early 1980s, I left to start Bruce Rogers Orchids, an orchid consulting and management company based in San Francisco. In 2002, I joined Terry Root of the Orchid Zone and co-founded OzGardens, a business devoted exclusively to hybridizing and growing *Sobralias*. The bug is still sucking.

Q: OK, I'm sold. I want a *Sobralia*! How do I get one?

A: They will be available at the Pacific Orchid Exposition from several vendors and at the San Francisco Orchid Society sale table. This is probably the best venue in the world for *Sobralias* right now with species and hybrids, ephemeral and field types and both mature plants and seedlings. *Sobralias* can be found at nurseries such as Berkeley Horticulture Nursery, Flora Grubb Nursery and Sloat Nurseries in Marin and San Francisco. Large specimens can also be found at Living Green in San Francisco. In San Jose, Serene Orchids has *Sobralia* seedlings. [At the exposition, Rogers says, expect to pay around \$15 for a seedling in a three- to four-inch pot.]

Q: What will you be showing at the Pacific Orchid Exposition next weekend?

A: The *Sobralias* will be in the entrance exhibit. We will have a few of the giants like *Sob. calloglossa* and *Sob. cattleya* and a few of the miniature and mid-sized hybrids. *Elleanthus* is a close relative to *Sobralia*, with identical foliage, but pine cone-shaped flowers, and they should have flowers (but the really big flowers don't come along until summer). And as the case with big shows like the POE, I am sure some other vendors will bring some amazing

Sobralias. I'll see you there. Hold onto your hat!

Q: What is it about orchids that attracts mostly men to worship at their feet?

A: Growing orchids is one of the few socially acceptable art forms that men can get involved in and their masculinity is never questioned.

Contact Bruce Rogers via Bruce Rogers Orchids, an orchid consulting and management company based in San Francisco, at brucerogersorchids@pacbell.net. Rogers and Terry Root co-founded OzGardens, a business devoted exclusively to hybridizing and growing Sobralias; ozgardens@pacbell.net.

Contact Holly Hayes at hhayes@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5374. Fax (408) 271-3786.

**56th Pacific Orchid Exposition.**

**What** A three-day celebration of these exotic plants and their flowers. This year's theme is ""Orchids Gone Wild.".

**When** Preview event with music, food and wine, 6:30-10 p.m. Thursday2/28. Regular show hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Friday2/29, 9 a.m.-6 p.m. next Saturday3/1 and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. March 2.

**Where** Fort Mason Center's Festival Pavilion, 99 Marina Blvd., San Francisco.

**How much** Preview tickets are \$30 in advance, \$35 at the door. Regular tickets are \$14 (\$12 if purchased online), \$8 for seniors and disabled, free for children 12 and younger when accompanied by an adult.

**Etc.** Check www.orchidsanfrancisco.org for a complete list of vendors.

**Details** (415) 665-2468

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